

“What If He’d Stayed?”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Luke 24:44-53

Have you ever wondered how the world might have turned out if Jesus would have simply stayed? Imagine the confident clarity, the certainty that we would enjoy on the most important matters. The scores of religions and the hundreds of denominations and sects within each of them would likely not exist. The disagreements that spawned these many spiritual splinters could have been resolved instantly by just asking Jesus. How could anyone doubt the word of a man raised from the dead, God in the flesh, eternal, ageless, full of transcendent wisdom, capable of remarkable deeds of power?

Not only would the peoples of the Earth be united in one vision of God, but the consequences of that unity would have likely prevented tremendous catastrophe, had Jesus just stayed, instead of returning to his Father in heaven on the fortieth day. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the burning of witches, the torture of heretics, the sacrifice of the martyrs, and the wars – the endless wars, so many motivated by religion – the wars might never have happened, had just Jesus stayed, instead of ascending. The wars caused by the boundaries that separate us -- class, race, ethnicity, ideology – those boundaries could have never stood up to the presence of Jesus and his loving Truth.

Have you ever noticed how there’s no explanation offered in scripture as to why Jesus ascended forty days after his resurrection from the dead? In fact, this astonishing occurrence barely receives attention. It’s almost an afterthought in both Matthew and Luke. Neither Mark nor John mentions this event at all in their gospels. So why did Jesus leave, when so much good could have been gained had he stayed?

Nobody knows. It's a mystery, which means we're speculating, something both fun and dangerous, but potentially edifying nonetheless. There's no indication in scripture that Jesus had to go, although we can easily understand his desire to ascend back to heaven and reign at the right hand of his Father. But then why did Jesus choose to leave those he loved so much?

Maybe it was time to give the Holy Spirit a turn. Jesus promised the disciples that he would send another, and just ten days from now, we'll be celebrating the arrival of the Holy Spirit with the Great Feast of Pentecost. But the Spirit, awesome as She is, is much less tangible than Jesus. The wind blows where it pleases, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and hence, infinitely prone to false claims by those who say they possess her, and equally prone to the accusation by some against others that the Spirit has abandoned them in favor of those purportedly more faithful.

Why couldn't Jesus have stayed, and brought down the Spirit, too? What a pair they would have made, back together again, just like the old days at the beginning of creation! How could anyone have said, "No," to such a powerful, physically present manifestation of God?

And perhaps that's the point. You see, Jesus came to show us a different way: the way of love, rather than hatred; the way of faith, instead of fear. And while we are – no bones about it – fully dependent upon God, it seems that we're meant to come to that conclusion and arrange our lives accordingly by choice on our own, guided by God through Jesus, and empowered to do so through the Spirit, but ultimately, it's our choice, because God loves us enough to let us be free, even when we don't use our freedom in

accordance with what God wants, even when we use our freedom in ways that are hurtful to us and to others.

Had Jesus stayed, much of the beauty and good we celebrate might have never been. For instance, by the indwelling of the Spirit and through the sacrament of Holy Communion, we the Church are the Body of Christ, and though divided by thought and practice, I believe we remain united by the Spirit, even when we don't want to be. With Jesus on the scene, though, the community we call Church would have been much less necessary, in terms of serving as a witness to his glory and coming kingdom, and though we rightly deplore the worst excesses of the Church, that Body has brought about some amazing things in the life of the world and in the individual souls that comprise it.

Had Jesus stayed, the world might have united permanently under him, but it might not. Had Jesus stayed, how many times might he have been crucified by those who could not embrace the reality of his resurrection? How many times might he have been tortured yet again by those who suffering the sin of arrogance, seized the crown of dominion for themselves, and would seek to destroy any rival, regardless of name or claims made about him?

How would it have all turned out? It's anybody's guess, and we'll never know. It didn't happen. Jesus ascended for better or worse; perhaps for better *and* worse. But by leaving, he did not abandon us. He did not leave us bereft. By ascending, Jesus gave us the choice to become him through each other as Body of Christ. That's a lot more complicated than if he'd stuck around, but also more satisfying, because it allows us to be agents who fulfill his promise, and that's quite a compliment for Jesus to pay us, considering some of the coarser elements of our nature.

So, despite our sensible misgivings, we gather this night to celebrate the day Jesus went home. We become once again the Body of Christ, physically present through our community as we share in Communion. We wait with hope the day we will see Jesus again in physical form, confident that we will recognize him easily when he comes, because in a way, he never really left, except in the most basic of ways. He dwells among and within us, and that's the wonderful gift he gave us by going, that we might choose to serve as vessels of his presence, and be filled by his grace, forever and ever. Amen.