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“What is this ‘little while’ of which he speaks?” (John 16:18).

*Acts 18:1-8; John 16:16-20*

In today’s Gospel, the words “little while” are repeated four times in four verses. Reading it aloud is like listening to the comic dialogue between Abbot and Costello about “Who’s on first?” The pattern of misunderstanding focuses on the importance of the meaning of this “little while.” Repetition heightens anticipation, a common feature in the Bible and in children’s stories. And of course, for a child, a “little while” can seem like an eternity if they are waiting for something special, something promised.

The disciples are, in a sense, almost like children who need to be reassured by Jesus as he reveals that he is going to depart from them. The words “little while” hold the promise of his return. They cannot bear the thought of his absence, and they will need to cling to his promise when he is gone. Their faith will be tested, but in a “little while” they will see him again.

The Ascension is a departure story, time to say goodbye. It is also a transition story, for the Jesus they see and have come to believe in is about to be revealed by his death and resurrection as their Lord and God. His return at Pentecost will be different than his physical, historical presence. His Paschal transformation will require their own transformation, a baptism of fire that will enable them to enter a new way of seeing. The Jesus who was once *with* them, their crucified and risen brother, will now be *within* them, teaching and guiding them through his Holy Spirit

to continue the redemptive mission he began in the world.

This said, the “little while” they are about to endure will be devastating, a long night of doubt and despair, self-recrimination and guilt for their failure and lack of faith, a time to remember him and long for his companionship and love, a time to grieve, purify and prepare themselves for the dawn of his return in glory. Like a woman in childbirth, they will be in anguish as they are reborn and become new creations in Christ.

We are summoned as a church to a crucial 10-day retreat between the Ascension and Pentecost. Our Easter faith enters the crucible of prayer that will empty out our own agendas and open us to the Spirit. We are asking to be *alter Christi*, “other Christs.” We want our baptismal identity to be real and effective in our lives. Our human maturity runs parallel to our spiritual development, and the key to both is to become who we really are. In a “little while” we will see Jesus as he is, and in his gaze and love for us, the Christ in each of us is meant to emerge so we can participate in the redemptive work of helping the world become what God created it to be.

Let us pray: *Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.*

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