

C Easter 6 5.26.19

John 19:23-29

Focus Statement: Jesus never leaves us.

A couple months ago in the Trumpet I wrote about how I was thinking of doing an occasional series on planning and preparing for funerals. You'll notice in the announcements the first one of those is coming up in a couple weeks. Cheryl Marshall from Kempf Funeral Home is going to be here to talk about pre-planning a funeral. Full disclosure, yes, she is from a funeral home, so she certainly has an angle here. But she spoke at St. Peter, and Pastor Jennifer said the presentation is really interesting and she doesn't do a hard sell. I thought about learning the information myself and just teaching the class, then I visited a couple funeral homes, asked about the process, and realized I probably should stay in my lane and invite someone in the field to share. If you decide to preplan, I am by no means endorsing or not endorsing Kempf. Cheryl was very nice when I met with her, but I'm also a big fan of Tom Coleman from Henry's because he and I always talk running, and the people from Farley-Estes are nice too.

Anyway, I'm rambling. Moral of the story, and of the rambling really, is that there can be a bit of awkwardness in talking about something as seemingly final as end-of-life decisions, estates, and funeral planning. We live in a culture that avoids, even denies, death. We don't even like to say the word "death," preferring euphemisms like "passed away" or "departed." Which don't even make sense. What does "passing away" even mean? How does one "pass"?

The sad truth of this is we can be so laser-focused on avoiding death at all costs that we can get in the way of life. Our medical system is set up to see death as failure, but I heard about a study recently where end-stage lung cancer patients who started hospice care sooner actually lived longer, and with better quality of life, than those who pursued every available medical option. Death is a part of life, and recognizing that, not being afraid of that, and having conversations about how we want to live at the end of our lives can actually improve life we have at the end of our lives, and make that transition easier on ourselves and on those we love.

That conversation is exactly the conversation we drop in on Jesus having with his disciples in our Gospel reading for this morning. To situate us, since we've been jumping around quite a bit lately, this is from what is known as the Farewell Discourse, which was Jesus' last words to his disciples after he washed their feet and before he went to the cross. What Jesus is doing here is he is preparing his disciples for their life after his death. He is assuring them that there will be life and that they will not be alone. This is a short section, the whole discourse is four chapters long, but I just want to walk you through it, because it's one of my favorite passages of scripture. It's actually a passage I read at funerals a lot, because I find such comfort in Jesus' words.

Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." We will make our home with them. Rolf Jacobson from Luther Seminary said this line is about the importance of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Dr. Jacobson said that Jesus' incarnation is "misery loves company,"

the crucifixion is “misery really loves company,” and the resurrection is only that Jesus is alive. But the ascension is where Jesus brings the incarnation full circle and returns to the Father to make a place for us. Jesus’ ascension is where our new life is promised, and the coming of the Spirit in and among us on Pentecost is where that new life starts to break in.

So Jesus is going not just because Jesus wants to be with the Father, but because Jesus is preparing our place in the relationship with him and the Father. A relationship that will be sustained on earth through, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name.” This Advocate “will teach us everything and remind us of all Jesus said to us.” A fun game, by the way, is to look up this verse in different translations of the Bible, because the word translated in the NRSV as advocate is one of those Greek words that is too deep and rich and nuanced for one English word. The word means advocate, like someone who speaks on your behalf, and it also means, comforter, guide, companion, and friend, to name a few. So while Jesus is ascended into heaven, preparing space for us in the relationship between Jesus and the Father, we already are a part of that relationship, right here, right now, through the Holy Spirit. It’s the great already and not yet of being resurrection people, even as Jesus is preparing a place for us, even as we are still in the midst of our journey, already we have the presence of this relationship in and among us. Friends, I can’t even really put words to this, to me it feels like a hug, and there aren’t good words to describe a good hug.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”

This is a great line, because there’s something incredibly subversive about what Jesus is

saying here. Jesus lived during the time of what was known as the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. It was called the peace of Rome because all of the wars fought in conquest to create the Roman Empire were more or less over, and the Roman military was now engaged in occupying territory rather than acquiring it. So let's be clear, if we describe peace as merely the absence of actual battle then yes, there was peace. But it was a peace held by power, by might, and most importantly, by fear. And peace through fear is no peace at all. You can get security through fear, you can get stability through fear, but you cannot get peace through fear. And, what's more, the tension on a system held in place by fear is so powerful that it will inevitably snap the system. Peace through fear is temporary. But real peace, true peace, the peace which Jesus gives, is free of fear. It may not be stable, it may not be sure, but it is deep, and true, and life-giving. The peace of Jesus is a peace that cannot see the ending, but can trust that the next step is sure, and that there will be a next step, and a step after that. The peace of Jesus is resurrection peace. It is peace anchored in the promise that the end is never the end, because there is no end in the circle of relationship in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And then we've got maybe one of the weirdest grammatical constructions in scripture. "You heard me say, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.'" For the record, if that is a line from earlier in scripture, I don't remember it. And I have no idea what it means, what Jesus is talking about. I don't know how Jesus could be both coming and going. But it makes me think of what we were talking about earlier, about Jesus going to the Father and the Holy Spirit coming. In order for there to be a next thing, there has to be an end to the previous thing. The incarnation, the incredible gift of God taking on flesh in order to be

with us, that finite being had to end in order for the infiniteness of God to unfold. The incarnate Jesus had to go away in order to make space for the Christ to come.

And here's the last big, powerful push to drive this message of love home. "If you love me," and, fun fact, because I can't resist a good fun fact. The word translated "if" here, apparently it's a functional if. Which means it it's not a condition, it's a statement of fact. So it read more like, "If you love me, and you do, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father... And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe." Friends, think about it, none of these things are true yet. But they will be. The disciples do love Jesus, but they are not rejoicing that he is going to the Father. Quite the opposite really, they are going to be dejected, depressed, and even terrified at the events that are about to occur. And when they do occur, even though Jesus told them about them so that they would believe, they do not. Not right away, anyway.

But they will. They will believe. They will rejoice. They will have peace, they will not fear. What Jesus does in these words is he speaks into being a new reality. A reality that is still unfolding, but will unfold. All of this promise will take place, because Jesus, the word made flesh, spoke it into being.

All that fancy theological pondering to say this simple promise. Because of Jesus, because of his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, we have relationship with God the Father and nothing can ever separate us from that relationship. Not doubt, not sin, not fear, not even death itself, heck especially not death itself can ever separate us from that love.

Paul told the Corinthians: “When we live we live in Christ and when we die we die to Christ, so that whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God.” Amen.