

May 29 2016

## Scripture Lesson

Psalm 96

Sermon: *Saying Goodbye*

*John 17:20-26*

‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

Parting, departure, leave-taking is never easy, even when you agree on how to do it. Something—something down deep within us—resists the move from presence to absence. Have you ever been visited by people who do not know how to leave? They announce their departure, then hem and haw as if they were not serious. Or maybe they did not even announce to you that they were leaving, but you could see them eyeing their watch or the door, and you knew what was on their mind. Or perhaps you have wanted to leave when visiting someone—and you haven’t known how to do so gracefully.

As many of you know, Sandy and I were just in Scotland and Ireland to be in both countries. We wanted to familiar ourselves with what we were seeing. And one of the things that I read was that the typical Scottish saying as they left one another—the Scot might say. “Wouldn’t it be better if you were a-coming instead of a-going?”

Saying goodbye doesn’t come naturally to us—one must be taught. There’s a way to do it. The move from presence to absence is a frightening one. When someone is present to us, our space is filled, we are not alone, and there is conversation and communion. When someone leaves us, there are crises. Absence creates a void. What will fill it? Absence means silence, awesome, lonely, gaping silence. No wonder we fear it, no wonder we avoid it, we cling to the presence of the one who is leaving, anything to avoid the goodbye.

But you had better become accustomed to bidding farewell. Life is a long series of leave taking, a long series of movement from presence to absence. Our first major loss may have been that of our mother as we began to spend our days in school, away from those protective arms that had long sheltered us from pain. You see, life is a string of farewells.

In a class on marriage the teacher asked the students to name a good reason to have children. "So you won't be lonely in your old age," came one person's answer. "Get a dog," the teacher replied. Where are your parents today? Often, even if our parents are still alive, in some ways, many of us have already said goodbye. We have moved miles away making daily contact not at all or by telephone, but with our very presence only a few times a year. Few people today stay in one place. Every 'hello' leads to an inevitable goodbye.

And we fear good bye. Oh, as we grow older, we learn not to cling to Mommy's knees when the baby-sitter comes. We learn to cut out wailing by October of the first grade. But absence still hurts. I told a friend of mine whose mother died that one of the cruelest aspects of death is that you really can't remember. "He'll live on in your memories," we sometimes say of the dead. Don't believe it. Oh, we remember this story, or that day perhaps, a brief snippet of the voice, but every day, memory becomes fainter. And it makes us wonder if we made progress when we learned to stop wailing for Mama in the first grade.

It's a painful, frightening to be left alone in the void, the great gap called absence. The words we use at leave-taking, though now secularized and emptied of religious significance, still harken back to a day when departure meant a time so threatening and painful, that we needed God to help us do it. The English goodbye, the Spanish adios, the French adieu all imply that when we part, in the moment between here and not here, presence and absence, we best give someone to God when we can no longer hold them ourselves. Goodbye, God be with you.

Although you probably didn't notice, all the gospel lessons through the six Sundays of Easter have come from the Gospel of John. Four long chapters, John 13-17 Jesus bids his disciples farewell. It takes only a few verses for Jesus to say goodbye in Matthew or Luke, John drags Jesus' departure out so long that it can be said to be the problem of this Gospel. Jesus, the one who called us, taught us, turned water into wine and raised the dead, is leaving us. All 4 chapters take place on a long sorrowful evening in spring, in a garden, a garden when Jesus is soon to be arrested and taken away to death-the ultimate goodbye.

The questions of the disciples are the simple childlike questions that you might hear from children. Mommy and Daddy gather hat and coat and prepare to leave for the evening. The children look up from their play and ask always the same questions; "Where are you going?" "Can we come too?" "Who's going to stay with us?"

Jesus is about to go. What's to become of us? The disciples wondered. Jesus promised in John 14:18. "I will not leave you orphaned." Still, how can we be sure? Through this long farewell speech of Jesus occurs, in John's, before his death, it is right that we occupy ourselves with it now, in the time after Easter, when we are apt to feel the tension between presence and absence, between having and not having Jesus more keenly than at any other time in the church year.

We're after Easter Day by two months. The job of your preacher on Easter was to help you sense the presence of the resurrected Christ, real available, present, standing among us. For some of you, it worked. You really did leave church on Easter morning, striding forth into the bright Easter sunlight, convinced that journeyed not alone. He's back!

But then there are always the Sundays after Easter. The crowd dwindles, the music fails to fill every corner of our worship space, and when you sing those post-Easter hymns, sometimes yours is the only voice you hear. It would have been different if the church's claim were that was resurrected, brought back to life, period.

But that isn't the story. "In a little while, you will see me no more," says Jesus. The one who says 'hello' on Easter, soon says 'goodbye'. No matter how close that presence feels on Easter, there's always the absence after Easter.

"He isn't here," said the angel to the women at the cemetery, 'he's gone on before you."

Easter morning, Mary Magdalene went out to the tomb to dress the decaying body of Jesus with spices. But his body wasn't there. She asked a gardener. "Where have they taken him?" But this was no gardener. It was the risen Christ. Then Mary realized that nobody keeps Jesus tied down fixed in one place.

Mary tried to cling to Christ, to hold him close so he couldn't get away again, but to hold Jesus may be an attempt to limit him, to grasp or define him. But you can't hold Jesus in that sense. He is risen! He's moving out, beyond the confines of our expectations and categories. He's out to get hold of new life for us, so we define his comings—and goings--.

Again and again in John's gospel, the story is the same, the disciples, like Mary, try to get a hold of Jesus, fix him, and define him. But he keeps vanishing, leaving them as quickly and mysteriously as he came.

"I'm going to prepare a place for," he tells them, He can't prepare if he doesn't go. So we can't hold Jesus.

The Christ after Easter is living, not some pet for whom we whistle and he is there. He comes and he goes. He is present, then absent, Hello. Goodbye. We have no means like Peter Pan of closing eyes, believing very, very hard in fairies and bringing Tinker Belle back to life. The risen Christ is not Tinker Belle. His comings and goings are at his determination, not ours. If you meet here in worship today he comes as a gift, not as a result of our efforts.

The free living Christ of Easter explodes some of our pieties; “Since I took Jesus into my heart.” “Since I put Jesus in charge of my life.”

No. We can’t take the risen Christ anywhere. He takes us places. He comes and he goes, not because he is mercurial, undependable. He still has work to do. That’s why he goes. He has other sheep to bring into his fold—a place to prepare for us. Jesus came back to us—surprised us. But even if he couldn’t be held by death, so he cannot be held by us. Jesus is getting ready to go, to ascend to his father and our God. ‘Where are you going?’ we ask. “Can we go too?” “Who is going to stay with us?” These are the questions of the disciples. These a good, normal post-Easter questions of the disciples.

In response, Jesus doesn’t promise us that we’ll never feel alone, doesn’t say that the times of absence, the dry valley of loneliness, is not hard. He doesn’t assuage our fears with cheap consolation.

What he does is, before he goes, he prays for us. You can tell much about people by observing the way they leave, the way a person says goodbye. I think of Moses’ speech to Israel as they stood on the threshold of the Promised Land and Moses stood on the threshold of death.

Jesus has spoken farewell words to his disciples. But at the end, at the pinnacle of his farewell, he prays for us. That’s what today’s scripture reading is: Jesus’ prayer for us.

I don’t know why you’ve come here today. I don’t know what burdens you brought through these doors, but I know enough about a congregation to know that, even here, you can hardly find a place to sit out there for all the baggage, burdens, fears, unresolved grief, conflict, and pain that dragged in here on even an average Sunday.

And you know, if you’ve been here before, that no matter how good the music, the hymns, the sermon, the presence, you’ll probably drag a lot baggage out with you when you go, when Jesus goes—in the absence. So what’s going to become of you?

I’ll tell you. Jesus prays for you. As Hebrews says, we’ve got a great High Priest, seated high in heaven who is good at interceding with God, because he sits next to God. When he goes, he doesn’t say farewell and forget about us. He prays for us, he never stops praying for us to God. And perhaps like the Scot, we should say about Jesus, “Wouldn’t it be better if Jesus was saying a-coming instead of a-going.”

He never stops talking to God about. Never!