



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, May 17, 2020
The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; and John 14:15-21
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Because I Live, Ye Shall Live Also

Jesus saith unto his disciples: “Yet a little while and the world seeth me no more, but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also.”

This word of our Lord is from the Gospel reading this Easter morning, yet I should make it clear that, despite what you might expect this deep into the season, this is not the *resurrected* Jesus speaking. These are the words of Jesus the very night before his crucifixion, after his Last Supper, and from the start of his Farewell Discourses in John. He is speaking to eleven of his disciples in the Upper Room, reduced by one for Judas has just stormed away to conspire with the authorities. And so, to a fractured fellowship, in a world that is closing in, Jesus begins his long goodbye in a discourse that continues for a number of chapters. His farewell is deeply personal and relational. He tells his friends that, despite the world being unable to see him, he will be there, all the same, returning to His Father in heaven. He also declares that the Father is in him, and he is in the Father. He tells his friends to trust in this paradox, and in an astonishing statement, he says that if they can’t trust in that picture, then at least trust in all the things that had taken place through Him. Jesus tells his friends that with that kind of trust and belief, even though he was leaving them, they would see even greater things unfold than had happened so far.

This is a significant part of his Farewell, Jesus’ trying to assure his friends that not only would they be “okay” after he was gone, but that his activity wouldn’t end, and that they would thrive and grow. Not only through their own strength, but supported by a presence that would come, as Jesus goes. A presence of Truth, and a presence rooted deep within, invisible to the world, but visible to them who believe.

In our version of the Scriptures, Jesus talks about that person as the “Comforter,” but another way to name this is as an Advocate, or a defender of a prisoner before a judge. Someone by their side, vouching for them, someone giving them the words they will need to speak, and also someone united with the Truth of the universe, a full-fledged presence of God that would be with them, coming in Jesus’ name, even after Jesus apparently departed from them. Our other shorthand for this divine reality is “the Holy Spirit.” And Jesus, during his Farewell Discourses, is looking not only to his departure at death, but also his departure after Easter at his Ascension to heaven, trying to prepare them for the Spirit’s descent upon them to earth.

I can understand the urgency that Jesus must have felt, the urgency to give solace to his disciples so that they might withstand the anguish of losing him not once, at the Cross, but again at the Ascension. For those who had listened to Jesus carefully, this would have been hanging over their head at Easter, it would have been

the subtext of every Resurrection appearance, the expectation for Jesus to leave them again. No matter how uplifting and life-changing, there must have been some measure of anticipatory grief in every encounter. Remember how almost immediately after Mary Magdalene recognizes the risen Christ at the grave, He tells her not to hold on to him, for he tells her he is going to ascend to his Father very soon. Even Easter, it seems, is another long goodbye. Like in the Farewell Discourses, the Resurrected Jesus doesn't just savor the time with his friends, but takes the time to prepare his friends for his leaving, seeking to point beyond the limits of their sight, spurring his friends forward so that they can "fare well" in living hope of what is beyond the horizon, beyond Jesus' a second departure from Mount Olivet, what may seem, no matter how glorious, like a second death.

I think that we share in the disciples' difficulty in understanding how it could be that Jesus' death, and even his visible departure into heaven sometime after that, how that could mean anything but his profound absence? But this is why he takes great pains to explain this to them, and to us through them, again and again: his visible departure does not mean death and absence, it means ever more life and ever more presence.

As he said to them, "Yet a little while and the world seeth me no more, but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also." Christ's presence may be hidden to the world, but it will not be hidden to those who are ready to perceive that Advocate, that fortifying Spirit of Truth. Not only will Jesus' friends see that Spirit, but that Spirit will live through them, active and creative, grounded in love, manifesting peace and mercy at an even greater scale than they had known before, a scale so great that it has reached as far as our hearts so many centuries later and will continue beyond our hearts until kingdom come.

This trust and this hope gives us the energy we need to make it though. The Love of Christ, the Love for Christ, the Love of his Comfortable Words, all these and more work as a kind of internal combustion engine that translates His Spirit into the energy that animates each of our lives, inspiring others, a presence that comes to us not from above or alongside, but from within, a presence of extraordinary intimacy and comfort, and which then proliferates to who can tell where, connecting us in the Spirit with the friends of God in every place and in every era, bound up in eternity through the power of that same Spirit.

This ostensibly hidden reality is especially important to lift up in this time of social distancing and careful isolation. If not the sight, thanks to certain technologies, we are now separated from the touch of people that we love, we are unable to touch the sacraments of the Church, all manner of unbidden distances and absences that truly threaten to overwhelm us if we only look at the surface of things. It is in prayer and in common worship and in hearing the Farewell words of Christ today that we are empowered to see more deeply than that surface.

When you make your Spiritual Communion today, for example, you show forth the transcendent bonds that course through this earth, like the risen Christ who passed through the walls of the upper room at Easter, like the Spirit who, like flame, passed through those same walls at Pentecost after Easter, Christ passes through every barrier in this present time even to the chambers of your heart.

Through the love of Christ marked by mercy and peace, and through the love of one another in this time in so many creative new ways, it is the Spirit, the Advocate, who collapses the distances between this place and that place, between heaven and earth, between God's heart and our heart, so that, as with death, the power of absence to claim us falters and fails.

For the presence of Spirit may so often be hidden to the world, especially in dark times, but in his Farewell, Christ prepares us to see that Spirit, even in the dark, a Spirit that lives and acts in us after every departure, after every pause, a divine presence in every absence, a light in every darkness.

During our present separation, I've also been thinking of the old spiritual, "He's got the whole world in his hands;" alongside all those Salvator Mundi paintings where the entire world is in a regal Christ's hand, that crystal globe; and then the vision of Dame Julian of Norwich, where not just this planet, but everything that

is made, all Creation, is no bigger than a hazelnut in the palm of God's loving hand. In Christ, we are not only connected to one another through the Spirit, supported, and comforted, at the scale of God's love, we are all living in one place together, in close quarters in the Spirit, in one room, in one hand, enveloped and sustained by that same Spirit in every place, surrounded by a love that made us, fills every gap, and cradles us, together, as one.