

Sermon Easter 6c 07

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

Jesus is leaving.

From John, we hear words Jesus said to his disciples at their last Passover meal together before he was betrayed and killed. Now, we hear them again after God’s great triumph in Jesus over death and annihilation – after the wonder and joy and unbelievable awe of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus is alive again, transformed but alive, and all is even more than it was before.

And now, we hear Jesus saying these words to us again. Jesus is offering us words of advice, comfort, promise, and even a little bit of rebuke as he prepares us for the next big change.

Jesus is leaving.

For 40 days after rising from death, Jesus visits with his friends and followers. Now, 40 days after that first Easter, Jesus will leave.

There’s a song I used to hate as a child. “I’m leaving on a jet plane, don’t know when I’ll be back again, Oh babe, I hate to go...” Hit all my fears as a child, as I connected this song to anxieties that my mother would someday leave. Fears that I would someday lose the incredible bond with someone who I knew deep in my bones adored me. Fears that she would reach some limit she couldn’t endure or surmount in my parents’ marriage. Fears of something unknown that would take her away – any

unknown reason – which later became real as the ovarian cancer that claimed her life when I was a teenager.

I hated that song. It is the first memory I have of being really troubled by how life's uncertainties and impermanence could claim someone, something, so dear to me.

Jesus is leaving. In this great, awesome, wonder-filled season of Easter, while we are still getting used to saying and daring to believe, "He is risen!", we find ourselves having to say good-bye, or at least so-long. And so today, before the great day of Jesus' ascension (which we mark this Thursday), we hear Jesus speak to our sorrow, our grief, our worry, our uncertainty.

It doesn't matter how one parts – with fresh memories of triumph or with anticipation of suffering and sorrow. Jesus' friends and followers faced the same feelings twice, within weeks of each other. Can you imagine? And so we hear Jesus saying to them what he might have said approaching this second time he leaves.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I."

Don't worry. You will be all right. I am leaving my peace with you. I am going, but I will return again. In the mean time, love me by letting me go, by letting me return to the heart of my love. Let your love for me be transformed – don't cling to me, but hold on to all that we have shared and that I have given you.

This is not so different for any of us who leaves home. That first time when our mothers or fathers take us to camp and leave us. That time when we unpack the car

and load it into our dorm room, and say goodbye to our parents – and then sit for some moment, however brief, as we adjust to the reality, “Oh, I’m on my own now.” Leading up to this moment, and in the moments after the leave-taking, we find ourselves wondering, “Am I really prepared for this? Have I internalized what I have received?”

And so the journey begins anew. We venture forth, a bit uncertain and second-guessing ourselves. But having internalized our beloved, we find ourselves able to face our own journeys with new inner strength that we had no idea was developing all along. And as we turn our gaze out upon the world, we realize what a hungry world it is. That is our journey from our own homes. And that is the journey of Jesus’ apostles, as they discovered people they never expected to meet who were eager to hear God’s word.

“During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.”

Paul had begun to hit his stride as a missionary proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. Up to this moment, he had been up and down the coastal regions of Asia Minor along the Mediterranean, preaching and helping to start and strengthen small Christian communities. He had already responded to God’s prompting and had stretched the Church to open its doors to Gentiles, and Churches across Asia Minor were growing. Then Paul had a vision – a vision of a world and people hungry for God’s grace, in a land almost 1000 miles by sea and land from Jerusalem. Paul caught a glimpse in his vision of Macedonia seeking God and ready to receive Good News.

Macedonia hundreds of years previously had become the center of civilization and political power, under Alexander the Great. Today, Macedonia is the region comprised of northern portions of Greece, Macedonia, and some of the Balkan areas. In Paul's day, Macedonia had become a Roman tributary state and was a place of intense economic and cultural exchange, with people and customs of every type known in the Mediterranean world coming into contact. It was a place very far culturally as well as geographically from Jerusalem.

This is the lure of God, my friends. This is what it means to be drawn out of ourselves and into places we never expected to go. This is the Spirit's evangelistic call, deep within us. We hear a voice crying out, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And we respond. So we as the Episcopal Church have responded to global concerns to reduce infant mortality, increase maternal health, raise the level of education, and support cottage industry and trade worldwide when in 2006 we adopted the Millennium Development Goals as part of our mission. So we as Christians in many denominations are responding to the opening doors in China as the Chinese Protestant Church grows more quickly than it can train and equip pastoral leaders, by sending teachers. So CDSP is responding to a call from those churches and individuals in the Diocese of San Joaquin that have asked to stay in the Episcopal Church, by sending a group of faculty members there to teach and offer support. So is the vision of many people in all areas of our Church to reach a new generation – and our own children – with the joyous, transforming power of the Gospel. So Sara in San Francisco sets up a feeding program that has garnered national attention, and Kaze moves in her retirement from Chicago to settle in Navajo country and work with poor White and Native American youth. And so you have found yourself stirred to respond to the cry of a hungry world.

And the thing is, at every turn, every time we respond to this kind of vision or call, every time we offer what we have to others who are not “from our own country,” we ourselves are transformed. My friend Mike Kinmann, who is helping the Church work on Millennium Development Goals, talks about how his entire vision of church and of daily life has been transformed by his time in Rwanda and Burundi. My own travels in China among Christians has renewed my faith and given me new hope. Sara and Kaze speak repeatedly of how the people they meet have enriched their lives immeasurably. When you follow the call, your own country is enlarged. You find new family.

“A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.”

Lydia was a working Macedonian woman, a self-starter whose trade and management of others had allowed her to gather some wealth. She and her household were the first European converts to Christianity recorded in our scriptures. And, like many Macedonian matriarchs, she exercised in her household and business the same authority as a man. In a world far from his home, Paul found a kindred soul, touched her heart with the message of Jesus, took joy at baptizing her and all who were in her house, and found himself offered a home away from home and a new partner in spreading the Gospel. Lydia was insistent in her grateful generosity. “Come and stay here. And I will support what you are doing.” And Lydia’s world was transformed, as she opened the doors of her home to form the first house church in Europe, as she became the mother and a great leader of Christianity in Europe, and as she traveled with Paul in spirit as she supported his ministry.

“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...”

Yes, Jesus is leaving. But he has left us well-equipped, with all that we need – including the counsel and prompting of the Holy Spirit within and among us. And what he said is not just a promise – it is simply a fact. Those who love Jesus will continue to love him by following what he has given us in teaching and example, and that act of following is what makes God present and Christ making a home with us. With their eyes and hearts drawn out beyond themselves, Paul and Lydia found such transformation – and a new world began to emerge.

And that is how the Kingdom of God breaks in on the world. Oh, it’s not yet here. But we know moments when we can say it’s on its way. We can almost glimpse parts of John’s vision in Revelation –

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations... Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face... ⁵And there will be no more night; for the Lord God will be their light.”

Jesus is leaving. And our journey is begun.