

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 2014
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett
St. James' Church. Mt. Airy MD

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples what is going to happen next, and to ease their concerns about it. It takes a long time for Jesus to get his message across. Indeed, John devotes four whole chapters to this conversation, which takes place between the foot-washing at the Last Supper and Jesus' arrest in the garden. And the hard part for Jesus, what takes up four chapters, isn't explaining that he is going away; it's trying to ease the anxiety of his friends about what will happen when he's gone.

For a church in the middle of a search process, that has a familiar ring to it. Jesus is departing, and the disciples are going to get a replacement, a "Messiah-In-Charge" in the form of the Holy Spirit, before they transition to their new calling. And everything about the transition is causing anxiety for Jesus' friends.

Now, please don't think I'm suggesting that any person or part of the transition here at St. James' corresponds with Jesus or the Holy Spirit or God the Father – that would be an unhealthy burden to place on any human being. But John's gospel does remind us that change always brings uncertainty and anxiety.

I've noticed it a little around here. This is a healthy parish, so there's not a lot of the kind of stress that some congregations in transition find themselves in, but there's still, among some, a bit of worry that the search isn't going fast enough, or that not everyone's opinion (meaning their own) is being heard, and some general worry about whether things are going to get worse in some way during the transition or after it. If you have had some of those worries, you have good, solid biblical precedent – the disciples in John's gospel reacted in much the same way as they tried to understand what Jesus' departure meant for them personally, and for the community." Why must you go?" and "What will happen to us?" were the questions on the disciples' lips.

Certainly that is not everyone's story, not everyone's reality. Some approach change with more excitement than anxiety, while others are not as invested in the process or the outcome, and some respond to uncertainty by disengaging. But if you are one of those who is worried, I want to remind you of what Jesus said to his anxious disciples. No matter what happens, though priests and leaders come and go, you don't need to be anxious because you are not being left alone.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

Yeah, well that's easy for Jesus to say. What about us? We don't know whether things are going to better or worse for us. We don't know whether our needs will be met, whether our priorities will still be important, whether our voices will be heard. We don't know what's going to happen. Change, even change for the better, if that's what this is, also brings loss; also brings fear.

But that's the essence of Jesus' last long conversation with his disciples. The disciples keep giving voice to their anxieties: "We don't know where you're going." "What does he mean by saying to us, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" and "What does he mean by this 'a little while'?" We do not know what he is talking about." And Jesus responds not by telling them that everything is going to be all right; not by saying that none of the things they are afraid of will happen. Instead, in typical Jesus fashion, he actually says that even worse things than those they fear may happen, both to them and to Jesus. But, and this is the point he makes over and over in as many ways as he can think of, whatever happens, they will not face it alone.

"Peace I give to you, my own peace I leave with you." The Father and I will make our home with you. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with

you, and he will be in you. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

And in the words we heard last Sunday from the beginning of this chapter, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

We don't know what tomorrow will bring, the good or the bad. Times of obvious transition may help us to remember that that is always true, even when all seems to be on a smooth and steady course. We never know what tomorrow will bring, but we do know that whatever it brings, we will not have to face it alone. The Holy Spirit, the advocate, the comforter whom Jesus promised to send, is always here – you don't have to look very hard to see the presence of the Spirit in this community and in the transition process.

Strange and wonderful things happen when we follow Jesus. Who could have predicted that the same man who, in last Sunday's first reading was the official witness to the stoning of St. Stephen, would, a short time later, be standing in the square in Athens telling the Epicureans that the selfsame Jesus whose followers had been persecuting was not only the Son of the one, true, living God, but that that God was no stranger to the Athenians; that although they did not know God by name, God's temple had been in their city all along.

God is in our midst, even when we don't know it. God, whom Jesus says is in us because we are in Jesus and Jesus is in us, is never far from us, even when we try to take ourselves far from God. And Jesus, who went away and is coming back, is nonetheless here whenever we gather in his name – we are his visible body in the world, and how could Jesus be closer to us than that?

Which should remind us that we also have each other. Individuals may come and go: friends, family, leaders and strangers; but the body remains whole. We need not face anxious times alone because Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit has called us together to be one another's advocates, companions, friends and family. That is the peace that Jesus gives us. That is the peace Jesus leaves with us.

So do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Which is Jesus' way of saying, "just relax." Actually, we don't have any record of Jesus saying "just relax." But he did say, "don't be anxious." And he did say, "don't be afraid." And he said those words over and over again because he knew we would have a hard time following them. But we can relax. We can lay down our fears and anxieties – put them in Jesus' care, because although we are always walking the paths of change, whether we know it or not, we never walk them alone.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Amen.