

6th Sunday of Easter
"I am going away AND I am coming to you"
John 14:23-29

There's a story, told by a campus pastor about a conversation he had with a student one day. At one point in the conversation, the student asked him, "Pastor, what is the real difference between Christianity and any other world religion?"

It was such an important question that the pastor paused, thought for a moment, and then answered.

"The difference is Christ, the presence of Christ."

As the words started to sink in, he added: "It's not just the values of Christ, for there are similarities between Christian values, and values taught by other faiths."

"The biggest difference is the presence of Christ." ¹

"That's what happened on Easter," he told her.

Christians don't follow just a great teacher or prophet they follow a Savior, whom God raised from the dead."

Later on, looking back and reflecting on that conversation with the graduate student, the campus pastor said:

"I stick by that definition. Christianity can't be boiled down to a list of rules to be obeyed,"

"Christianity, at its heart, is Christ present with his people, living and reigning among us."

Isn't that great? I love that definition!

It really captures what the Easter season is all about.

I hope you've noticed that one of the reoccurring themes on these Sundays after Easter, has been the presence and power of the Risen Christ.

On Easter morning, the disciples were huddled behind locked doors hiding in fear.

But after Jesus came and stood among them,

after he walked with them along the road to Emmaus,

and ate breakfast with Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee the disciples were not the same.

Jesus' presence had changed them.

Doubting Thomas became a believer. Peter, who denied Jesus three times, became such a powerful evangelist and leader of the church. Paul, who persecuted Christians, was chosen by God to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

¹ Wm. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Apr. May, June 2001 p. 38.

Next Sunday, the season of Easter draws to a close.
 And our Gospel readings now turn our eyes toward Jesus' ascension:
 the story of Jesus' transformed presence with us.

Unfortunately, the Day of Ascension falls in the middle of the week,
 which means that we don't celebrate it with the degree of importance that it deserves.

So this morning, let's dig into our Gospel reading and let it lead us from Easter to Jesus' Ascension. Let's begin with verse 28.

In verse 28, Jesus tells his disciples, "I am going away, AND I am coming to you."
 How can that be?
 His disciples must have wondered, "So, which is it Jesus?
 "Are you going away, or are you coming to us?"

What Jesus is saying seems to be a contradiction.
 But the reason we have such a hard time understanding Jesus
 is because we tend to think in very concrete terms.

A person can't be in two places at the same time.
 but the key to understanding Jesus' ascension is to remember:
 that by ascending to Heaven, Jesus' presence was not withdrawn...it was transformed.

Jesus was not taken away from us, instead Jesus was lifted up and glorified by the Father,
 so that he could be in all places and at all times.

That's what Jesus meant when he said,
 "that the Father and I will come to you and make our home with you."

Think about that for a minute.

Have you ever heard someone refer to God as the "man upstairs?" As if God were off in some
 distant place?
 Jesus is promising us, that God is not a God who loves us from a distance.

Instead our faith is in a living God, a Risen Lord, who is present with his people
 who comes to us and makes his home with us and in us.

And not only do we have the promise that the Father and the Son are with us...
 today's Gospel gives us the assurance that God, the Holy Spirit, has been sent to us.

In verse 26, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the Advocate, or the Helper.
 In the original Greek, the Holy Spirit, is called, "the paraclete."
 That's a word that literally means, "the one who comes along beside."

I like that definition, because sometimes we get the impression that the Holy Spirit, is too mysterious to understand, too mysterious to talk about.

But Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit is not like that.
Jesus tells us to picture the Spirit of God, as a dear friend who “comes along beside you” when you need it the most.

God is not only a God, who is powerful enough to save us,
God also draws close enough to “come along beside us”, so that we know he cares about us.

Imagine yourself being admitted to a hospital for major surgery.

Loving family and friends try to be helpful.
But then as the surgery approaches they are asked to leave
and you lay there alone in that hospital bed.

But have you been abandoned? No. Truthfully you haven't.
In that moment you start to feel an indescribable sense of peace.
You know you were not alone in that room.

You feel the presence of Christ.
Your Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ has come along beside you.

A couple was vacationing in Europe, and while they were in Germany, they visited an old village. At the tourist office they were given a printed guide.
Then they spent a frustrating couple of hours trying to find their way around the town through the narrow, winding streets.

That evening, they signed up for an evening walking tour of the town,
led by an old man who had lived in the town all of his life.
It was wonderful.

He took the little group through alleyways, into the kitchen of the town's oldest restaurant,
knocked on the door of the town's oldest house...
pointed out things to the tourists, that there was no way they could have seen if they were on
our own, even with the best guidebook in hand.

There is no substitute for walking the way with an experienced guide and teacher,
someone who personally points the way, a Paraclete. And that's what Jesus promises us.

The Holy Spirit walks beside us, with us, teaching us.
There are lots of good things that the Holy Spirit, this Paraclete, gives us, but note today one particular promise...

particular promise... that the Paraclete will "remind" us (v. 26).
The Holy Spirit reminds of all that Jesus has taught us.

There was a woman named Jane, who had, by anybody's account, a tough life.
She had been in pain much of her adult life due to a terrible degenerative bone disease.
Her young son had died of leukemia.
Her husband left her shortly after that. She had had a tough life.

And yet she was always smiling.
Anyone in her congregation would tell you
that she was one of the most hopeful people you would ever meet.

She was the kind of person you liked to be around,
and she always seemed to have just the right word of encouragement at the right time.
"Jane is a reminder to me," said one person in the congregation, "of what this faith is all about.

She reminds me that, if you trust the love of Jesus, the world can be different."
We called her Jane.

Jesus' disciple John might call her a living reminder,
a human embodiment of the wonderful work among us of the Paraclete...the Holy Spirit.

I will not leave you as orphans! says Jesus.

To stand with us, speak to us, teach us, and remind us, he has sent us the Counselor, Advocate,
Comforter, Paraclete.

Thanks be to God! Amen