

(Not) Saying Goodbye

EASTER 6

St. John 14:15-21

In the name of Jesus. Amen

It's hard to say goodbye. As a long time campus pastor I always hated this time of year – graduation, graduation parties. I had always prayed for my college students to fail just that one last class so they'd have to stick around another semester, another year. In all seriousness, though, I did pray for that, but in spite of my efforts, they always tended to do graduate and move on. Of course, I was always happy for them, and proud of them, but man I just hated to say goodbye.

Yes, saying goodbye can be a difficult thing. Whether it's a recent graduate heading off to college – 'tis the season after all, or son or daughter getting married, a good friend who retires and moves to somewhere that actually has a summertime. Or putting that child on the school bus for the very first time. These kinds partings are such sweet sorrow, a mixture of emotions. Even though you'll miss your loved one, there is a joy for their new venture, or phase of life.

Then, of course, there are those goodbyes that are not bittersweet, but simply bitter. Getting fired from a job you love. The couple who divorces after years of marriage. Or perhaps worst, death itself. And worst among those, an untimely death. A soldier who goes off to war, and dies, leaving behind a wife and family. A pastor who is suddenly buried on Easter Sunday afternoon. A teenager who dies in a car accident the week before prom. Some of the most difficult goodbyes are those we don't expect, and out of which no good seems to come.

Today we stand on a time of near departure. This Thursday night we will gather to celebrate the great feast of the Ascension of Our Lord. So here Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples. He is preparing them, by his words, for his departure. He first spoke of that departure on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah. He spoke openly about it with his disciples, telling them just what was to come. *"The Son of Man is going up to Jerusalem, and he will be handed over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he will be crucified..."* The Gospels say he spoke plainly about this. Jesus was going away.

But what sort of departure will this be? Will it be a hopeless goodbye? A senseless tragedy? Or will there be, behind the sorrow, a cause for hope, even joy?

Jesus' words here hold out a promise. *"I will not leave you as orphans"*. When you think about it: What's a worse goodbye than seeing your parents die and leave you behind? What's more hopeless than an Orphan? Perhaps you remember Little Orphan Annie, and her "hard knock life" in the orphanage. No family. No tenderness and concern. No one to tuck her in bed or buy her Christmas gifts. But then the story turns when she is adopted by the wealthy Daddy Starbucks, er, I mean Warbucks, and her whole life goes from rags to riches.

In a way, as odd as this is going to sound, you were each born into this world as an orphan. You were cut off from your Father in heaven by your sin, and the sin you inherited. What a bitter departure it must have been for Adam and Eve to leave that garden. Not just because it was a beautiful paradise, but it

meant leaving the place where they walked with God. Since then, we've all been on the outside, looking in. Our sinfulness estranges us from our Lord, and in it, we are dead to him. And every time you, personally, sin, it's as if you say to God, "drop dead, Dad." We need repentance. We need forgiveness.

But enter Jesus. Jesus takes us from our orphanage of sin, our hard-knock life of suffering and death, and brings us to the mansions of heaven where He has prepared a place for us. He comforts us, even now, with that promise, and with his constant word. His Spirit helps us to remember, and to believe in all he has said. And by His grace alone do we live as children of God here in the world.

So no, the disciples won't remain orphans, though now their Lord would be going away for a while. He promises them that even in this departure there would be hope and blessing. He promises them the Holy Spirit. The Helper. The Spirit of Truth. He wouldn't help the disciples to feel good, or give them a spiritual rush. He would help the disciples to remain in the truth, and remember all his commands and promises.

[And I want you all to remember that when you are tempted, or others who maybe think that we as Lutherans are too cerebral or too committed to God's word, to think doctrine doesn't matter, or perhaps we should give in here or there on this or that, or maybe, Satan's greatest lie, "Did God really say?" The Spirit who lead the disciples and leads us today into His Word, is not a Spirit of mostly truth, or relative truth, but pure unadulterated truth. We care about doctrine because we care about our Lord's Words. They are His, not ours, or what we wish they would be.

The disciples would not be left as orphans - He would send His Spirit of Truth. And Jesus Himself would give them life - because of His life. For even though He was about to die, He would soon rise to life forever. And His resurrection means our resurrection. Jesus will not leave what belongs to Him in the grave that He departed from for those He seeks to call and gather.

Sure, in this departure that is quickly coming, the world will see Him no longer, but He promises, "*you will see me*". And this is the paradox wrapped in an enigma. Jesus is going, but He's kinda not. He's leaving, but He is also staying. He won't be seen, but he will be seen. He is dying, but he will live and so will his disciples - and so will you.. He is going to the Father, but He will be with you always, even to the end of the age.

This Thursday, the Christian church marks the Ascension of our Lord. Yes, Jesus will rise to the heavens in the sight of his apostles. But this wasn't the end either. Now seated in his rightful glory at the throne of God, and the Father's right hand, Jesus rules all things for the good of his people, the church. But even this isn't the end.

Because, oh yeah, He will return, and take us to be with him. Whether that return happens when you pass through the gate of death - or should we all live to see the last day when he comes again in glory - Jesus will not leave us forever. And yet even though he's gone, he is here, among us, in his word, in even greater ways, by his Spirit. In our baptism, in our ears, and at our altars.

There are times when we feel orphaned. Alone in the world. Like even God can't understand our suffering. Maybe especially when we have to say not just the bittersweet, but especially the bitter, goodbyes. But for the Christian, there is hope and even joy in such goodbyes. Happiness depends on circumstances, or happenings. Joy doesn't pay attention to what it sees with its eyes, but on what it hears in its ears.

Or to put it another way, with Christ, there is no goodbye, only a "see you later" - a full trust in the full throated confidence of what our Lord says, "*You will see me*". For Christians, there is the same. We look forward to the grand reunion of eternity with all the saints in heaven. And especially with our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear precious former orphans, God does not, and will not forsake you. He has already forsaken Christ on the cross. Your sins won't make Him hate you, He's already poured out His wrath on Jesus. For you, adopted children of the heavenly Father, there is only love and comfort and peace. There is an eternal home waiting for you where you will see Him. He says so, and his Spirit of truth confirms it. But the dining room table in that mansion is already here. Here you are already home because here He is still with you, now and ever...

In the name of Jesus. Amen