

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)
Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This Sunday of the church year falls between the Ascension of our Lord, which was this past Thursday, and Pentecost, which is next Sunday. The texts this week reflect the in-between, ambiguous nature of the disciples' circumstances between Jesus returning to the Father and the coming of the Holy Spirit. I can't help but make the connection to my own life in the wake of my Father's death four days before Easter this year. That was a super busy time for me, with four different services over the next four days on top of the normal busy-ness that happens at the death of a loved one. Fortunately I have three sisters who were able to be on top of all of that. And then there was the funeral, and all the people who showed up for it. Now all of that is well past and we are figuring out what the new normal will be, especially for my mom. Most of you have been through this kind of life change. You have lost parents. Some of you have lost spouses, some even children, and you have felt even more keenly that I have what adjusting to very different new normal is like.

The disciples in today's readings are in a period like that now. For the them, Jesus' ascension means that things are going to be different. Jesus is not with them anymore. They're on their own, and they have to figure out what to do. At the end of John's Gospel, in what I like to call John's second ending of chapter 21, (because the first ending is the Thomas story of Chapter 20) – in chapter 21, the disciples returned to fishing, what many of them were doing when Jesus called them. They were back to business as usual. In today's first reading, though, from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples are not back to normal. They know that their world has changed, that things will never be the same. Jesus is alive, and now after being with them 40 days he has ascended to the Father. And he has left clear instructions that they should wait in Jerusalem for the sending of the Spirit upon them. So they don't return to fishing or their other professions. But neither are they content to wait. We heard the first verses of this first chapter of Acts on Thursday at our Ascension service. The disciples' burning question for Jesus right before his ascension (which they don't know is coming) is whether now is the time. "Is this when you restore the kingdom of Israel?" they ask him. Jesus responds that they don't get to know the timeline. They have only to wait. But waiting is hard. They want to *do* something. So, knowing the symbolism of Jesus' twelve disciples reflecting the twelve tribes of Israel, they decide they need to replace Judas. Judas, you'll remember, had betrayed Jesus and then took his own life, prevented the kind of rehabilitation that Peter got in that second ending of John. "Peter, do you love me," Jesus asked him three times, "Feed my sheep." So Judas gets replaced by Mattheias in this episode before us today, and then we never hear anything about him again, not in the rest of Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament. But I'm glad we have this story, because it gives us a glimpse behind the scenes of the earliest church. We get to see that there were lots of other people besides the twelve disciples, people who had been with them all along who were also followers of Jesus, even though they never get mentioned by name.

Our Gospel reading, though, is what I really want to focus on, because it gives us Jesus' vision for this time of transition, which is a vision for the whole long life of the church until Jesus' return. This reading is from that long section of John's Gospel set on the night of his betrayal and arrest. Biblical scholars call it Jesus' "farewell discourse." Even though it takes place before his death and resurrection, it is preparing the disciples for the time after Jesus' return to the Father when they will be "in the world" in Jesus' place, and facing a new normal.

Much of this section of John is devoted to Jesus teaching the disciples what this new normal ought to look like: the servant nature of following in Jesus' footsteps, which Jesus illustrates by washing the disciple's feet, the "new commandment" or "new principle" of loving one another, the importance of abiding in Jesus' love so that they may bear the fruit of love, and finally the promise of the sending of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will lead them into all truth. It is the last chapter of this section that we read from today, and here Jesus turns his attention from the disciples to God the Father. Jesus knows that he can't just leave instructions. His followers are going to need God's continual help. So he prays on their behalf, but does so in their hearing. It's a lesson both in the importance of prayer and an example of what to pray for. So that's the first thing to notice in this Gospel reading.

The second is that Jesus is taking on the role of a priest, interceding with God on behalf of the disciples and offering sacrifice to God for them. That is the role of a priest in the understanding of the day, and it is the key to answering a question that often come up when studying this rather wordy text, namely what Jesus means by saying that he is sanctifying himself. This isn't something we say in normal conversation. And that's because we are so far removed from priests and sacrifices as the ancient world knew them. So it's easy to miss that Jesus here is performing the acts of a priest for his disciples, interceding with God and making a sacrifice on their behalf. But paradoxically he is also serving as the sacrifice that he is offering. In John, Jesus is the sacrificial lamb that takes away the sin of the world. That's what he means here by saying that he is sanctifying himself. He is consecrating himself for sacrifice the way a priest would consecrate, or bless, a sacrificial animal before it is killed. Jesus is both the priest and the sacrificial victim, as the choir sang at our Ascension service on Thursday. He is offering himself on behalf of the disciples in order to make them holy, to forgive their sin and set them apart for service in and for the world.

And that's the third thing to notice in this text. The disciples new normal is to be sent into the world on a mission. Jesus' resurrection could have been the final chapter of the story, the surprise ending that wraps things up by vindicating Jesus and his followers after the trauma they were made to endure. Jesus could presumably have taken them all with him to his Father's house. That would be the happily-ever-after Disney ending, the feel-good Hollywood resolution. Instead, Jesus goes and the disciples stay. Or rather, Jesus goes in order to be with them in a different way. But it is *not* the ending for them. It is instead only the beginning of a new chapter in which Jesus continues his mission in them to bring light and life to a world possessed by darkness and death. The disciples are now his agents, the branches to his vine that will bear the fruit of his love.

This in-between time that characterizes the life of the church is a time to be reminded that the mission of the church is to be in the world but not of the world, to not be satisfied with business as usual, or with a status quo that advantages some at the expense of many others. It is also a time to recognize our dependence on God's love and forgiveness in Jesus, and also recognize that as being at the core of our mission in connecting people to God, one another and the world.

The Easter season is winding down now after the Ascension we celebrated on Thursday. But Jesus is still risen from the dead. He is alive at God's right hand, where he is also praying for us, just as he prayed for the first disciples. May his prayer be fulfilled in our lives, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Because Christ is risen, alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!)