

Easter 6, 5-9-10
“Ready for the Departure”
John 14:23-29

We are entering a time of the year for departures. A time of leaving familiar places and faces. The school year will be ending. Graduations are occurring. Jobs may be changing. People will be moving.

Departures and transitions can raise anxieties and uncertainties, strange fears and threatening questions, along with excitement over a new opportunity; happiness over a chance for a fresh start, relief and satisfaction, indeed joy, over accomplishing a goal, completing a chapter in our lives.

We also are coming to a point of departure in our church year. Easter season is drawing to a close. The Festival of the Ascension will be celebrated this Thursday, the day, according to church tradition, on which the risen Christ ended his physical appearances on earth and ascended to heaven.

In the gospel this morning we find Jesus preparing the disciples for this departure, offering words of encouragement. All he was speaking was based on the reality that he had risen. The disciples could be at peace in the Lord's resurrection. Because of his resurrection, their hearts could be free of fear and anxiety.

And yet many of the followers must have had mixed feelings in hearing of his departure: a sense of loss, some anxiety or concern with loneliness. All this and more weighed on them with the Lord's talk of leaving them.

Now you and I know, as did the disciples, that resurrection is not always foremost in our minds, at the center of our lives, our focal point, as we move through our days, get caught up in the events and happenings that are a part of living.

We begin our day, most of us, by pulling ourselves out of bed, sometimes with some reluctance, easing into facing the world. A cup of coffee or a glass of juice brings us into the new day, not necessarily vivid, exciting thoughts about the resurrection of Jesus.

As the German theologian, Helmut Thielicke, once wrote: “We don’t think that way.... The bird of a cheerful breakfast in the hand is worth more than a couple of resurrections in the bush.” (1).

So just how does the resurrection of Jesus fit into our lives, particularly as we live with the reality of the Lord’s physical departure from earth along with other departures and leave-takings we may be facing?

For one thing, I suggest that the resurrection frees you and me to live each day within the perspective that we are secure in being who we are, as we are in this world.

What we do with our lives is important, but we need not make ourselves self- important by what we do, create images of how significant we are by our actions in life.

You and I need not idolize ourselves or let ourselves be idolized by others. Every person is uniquely important. Each of us contributes to the totality of life in this world.

The world lost a devout man this week who witnessed to this way of living. Baseball broadcaster, Ernie Harwell, never was full of himself. As one man said, “It was the loving Christ in him that connected him to so very many.” (2).

So the message in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You and I can accept and love ourselves and others. As we move through life, be it graduation; job promotion or demotion or loss; be it some transition in our bodily health, some change in relationships with friends or family; be it any loss or challenge, we still are who we are.

We are loved. We are secure. The resurrection gives us promise and hope. We can live by faith in God’s grace. And that is sufficient, even though we may not be sure about it at the time. We can be who we are without acting as if we are more or less than who we are. We need not be full of ourselves.

Secondly, the departure of Jesus did not change the disciples' relationship with God. They still were called to be disciples, empowered by the resurrection, even though at times they were uncertain, doubting, questioning, confused.

Jesus promised peace to the disciples. He gave them peace in his appearances after the resurrection. Peace was with them as the Lord departed and always remained with them. This same peace is ours, to lift us up, calm and comfort us, support us in the strife and struggle of our days.

Whatever we do or fail to do in life does not define who we are. We are defined by God's love, God's forgiveness, God's grace and peace through the risen Christ. This peace travels with us in making new departures, parting from what may be familiar and comfortable to face what may be unknown, even unfriendly.

The death and resurrection of our Lord Christ makes taking the risk of traveling in unexplored territory possible. We travel with the gift of peace, not only for ourselves but also for others, daring to share peace with those who may be without peace in their lives.

The risen Christ did not provide the disciples, nor you or me, with an easy life. They had to face the realities of living in faith and trust. But he did offer the assurance of his peace – a peace that passed all human understanding, peace that is beyond rational comprehension. Yet a peace that endured and traveled with the disciples without fail.

The peace we share with one another in the liturgy is much more than a friendly greeting. We are communicating the gift of the Lord's peace – the gracious well-being that the resurrected Christ has given and continues to give.

This peace, this well-being, is offered to all in the world for lifting up in lonely, depressing times, calming, comforting, supporting, strengthening, in times of suffering, especially with those alone on difficult pathways.

I recall Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, describing a Wednesday noon Eucharist shortly after Christmas. She waited in the sacristy with the reader, a former Roman Catholic priest named Bernard, listening for footsteps that would indicate worshipers were present. No steps were heard.

They waited five more minutes after the clock struck twelve, but still no one came. Bernard asked: “Do you want to cancel?” “I don’t think so,” she answered, although she felt her hands starting to sweat.” (3).

Brown Taylor recalled: “In the absence of a congregation, there is no mistake about whom the service was for. Bernard looked as timid as I felt.” (4). She invited him to come inside the altar rail with her.

Then Barbara Brown Taylor commented:

For the next 30 minutes we were the church. We praised God’s holy name. We proclaimed God’s word. We interceded on behalf of the living and the dead. And we confessed the sins of the whole world. After we had received absolution, we exchanged God’s peace. Then we broke bread and fed each other from God’s table. (5).

After the service the two returned silently to the sacristy. They knew talking about it made no sense. Bernard gave Brown-Taylor a hug and left. She hung up her alb and turned to fill in the service register with some puzzlement in her mind.

She explained:

Everything was obvious except “Number present.” I knew that “2” was right, but it did not seem true. I would have written “00” if I thought I could get away with it. I finally settled on “3,” to include the Invisible One whose presence is all that really counts. (6).

Yes, the Invisible One: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Advocate, the One who really counts for you and me.

As the service concludes today, you and I will depart for the world and the challenges that will confront us. We carry with us the peace, the assurance, the well-being, the hope, the comfort, the strength of God's presence in the resurrected Christ who has made a home with us.

Some of us may go alone, and we may go with feelings of apprehension, maybe desolation and sadness. Some tears may run down our cheeks with thoughts of a mothering person in our lives. Some fear may be causing our stomach to ache a bit.

But still we go, even to take a pathway not traveled before. Somehow we endure in trust and hope that the Invisible One is with us. There is one of us. Yet there are two of us and that includes the Invisible One, God, "...whose presence is all that really counts."

The President's wife, Michelle Obama, phrased the message a bit differently but with equal meaning when she commented on being a mother to her daughters. The first lady said: "I pray that they are happy with themselves so they're confident and secure in who they are. That's the basis of everything—that they feel loved, and they have an internal peace. Everything else will fall into place." (7).

May the peace in the resurrection of our Lord Christ go with you this day and always.

- (1) Helmut Thielicke, I Believe, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1968, p. 243.
- (2) TigerinVA Website, Detroit Free Press, Thursday, May 6, 2010, p. 15A.
- (3), (4), (5), (6) Barbara Brown Taylor, "Full house," The Christian Century, January 1, 2001, Vol. 118, No. 2, p. 24.
- (7) Carol Clurman, "America's Mom-In-Chief Michelle Obama," USA Weekend, Lansing State Journal, April 30-May 2, 2010, p. 8.

