

## **When Jesus Goes Away**

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### **John 14:23-29**

23Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

25”I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

28You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

### **Acts 16:9-15**

9During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. 11We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. 13On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 14A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 15When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

What do you do when Jesus goes away? That's the question that the disciples face. The night before his arrest and crucifixion he tells them that he is going away. What do they do then? What do we do when Jesus goes away? Are there times in your life when you feel like Jesus just isn't around? The reading from John takes place on Maundy Thursday, but we read it today because to those disciples, Jesus is going away again. After Jesus was raised on Easter Sunday, he stayed with his disciples for a while.

For forty days, actually, Jesus kept appearing to them and teaching them, instructing them, keeping them company, but only for forty days. And then he went away. We call this the Ascension, when Jesus ascended to heaven and it's supposed to be a happy occasion, when Jesus gets to go back to be with God. But what did the disciples think? Jesus was leaving them. What would they do now? What do we do when Jesus goes away?

I ask this question because I think there are situations in all of our lives when we wonder if God has abandoned us, when we feel left alone. I think the disciples must have felt that way when Jesus announced that he was going away. What would they do now? I think you know by now that this has been a difficult year in many ways for my family, for the church, and for me. When someone dies, it is normal to feel grief, to even feel left alone, to wonder where God is in the midst of all the sadness. But when grief comes and then keeps coming, it is natural to wonder where Jesus has gone and why has he left us alone. Last April, my wife's father, Kevin, passed away. Then a year ago this week our friend Murray Cooper died. It has been almost a year since Tom Ryan also died and we've said farewell to several others along the way. This last fall came at last the passing of Bill Hubbard and then three weeks ago my mother gave up this earthly life and went to be with God. All of these people were a large presence in my life and the passing of anyone of them leaves an empty space, but the passing of all of them in the last year just piles grief upon grief. And where did Jesus go in all of this?

This last week Erin and I made a trip to Washington, DC, actually to Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia for the interment of Erin's brother-in-law Scott. It was my first real visit to Arlington and it is an impressive place. In the midst of all the hustle and bustle of Washington and the horrible traffic that one has to endure to get there, the cemetery is amazing quiet and peaceful. The service for Scott was short and quiet and of course ended with a trumpeter intoning the notes of "Taps." But as we stood there as "taps" finished, we waited quietly for the servicemen and women to march away. But then a block or so away we heard taps again as another serviceman was interred. But as those softer faraway

notes finished, we heard more music begin. I'm sure that the person being interred away from us was a Navy person because the notes of the Naval Hymn began and voices began to sing, "Eternal Father, strong to save," which as I'm sure all of you remember the final verse goes, "O Trinity of love and power, all travelers guard in danger's hour; from rock and tempest, fire and foe, Protect them wheresoever they go; thus ever more shall rise to Thee praise from air and land and sea." And it was a reminder to me, who has no military background at all, that in that most hallowed of military sites in our nation, that God was reminding me that no matter how I'm feeling, that I'm never left alone. That I need to remember. And that's what Jesus tells the disciples, and that's actually what this Memorial Day weekend is about as well, remembering

Jesus tells the disciples that he is not leaving them alone, that the Holy Spirit comes to us to remind us, to help us remember. What do we do when Jesus is gone? We remember. We remember what he has taught us. We remember what he has done for us. We remember what he commanded us.

When Paul and Silas went out on their second missionary journey as recounted in the Book of Acts, they started by going to visit places where they had been before. This was a good idea to help encourage the churches that they had planted a few years before and to make sure they were doing well. And although all this traveling wasn't easy, it wasn't bad either, after all this part of the world was Paul's old stomping grounds. He had been raised here, he knew the cities and towns, he spoke the language, he knew where to go. But then one night he has a dream. He dreams of someone from Macedonia asking him to come there and help them. Macedonia wasn't far away in terms of mileage, but in a way it was a bit of a leap into the unknown. Up until now, they had been traveling and preaching in places they knew, in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. But this meant leaving the continent of Asia and going to Europe for the first time. It meant going someplace they didn't know, it meant leaving the familiar. But this is where memory comes in. Before he ascended to heaven, when he met with his disciples in Galilee, Jesus said to them, commanded them to "Go and make disciples of all

nations.” He didn't say, Go go and make disciples of people who look like you. Go and preach the good news to people who think the same way you do. Go and baptize folks that you would be comfortable being around. Don't do anything that is going to push you beyond your comfort zone. No, he says to go everywhere. Proclaim the good news to everyone. Even them. Even the people you can't imagine being allowed into the kingdom of God. For God loves even them.

And then perhaps they remember Jesus' next words, the ones that we say everytime we have a baptism or a confirmation or receive new members. We remember that Jesus said, and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Those times when Jesus goes away? Those times when we feel left alone? We aren't. Jesus never, ever leaves us alone. He sends the Holy Spirit so that he may be with us at all times, especially those times when it feels like everyone else has left us, that we remember that he never will.