

“Holy Spirit, Holy Grace”

John 14:23-29

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Several summers ago I was a chaplaincy intern at a hospital in Boston. One of the most unexpected and most important things they taught me that summer is that there is not one perfect way to say goodbye, and that people do it in many different ways. This should be basic, right? It was a surprise to me. It turns out that what is most important is that you understand how you say goodbye so you can communicate that to the people around you and they are not surprised if your farewell style is not the same as theirs. Some people say goodbye very directly and very quickly. They get right to the point. Some people hate goodbyes, so they avoid them, or they refuse to do them at all. That style is especially one where if you don't know that someone is a goodbye avoider, you might think that person is avoiding you or that there is something wrong with you. There isn't. That's just their style. It's why communication is helpful.

Then there is a third category of goodbyes. These are the people that have long drawn-out goodbyes. They express every emotion and thought. There are multiple hugs and kisses, and it can go on for hours or days or even weeks. For those of us who don't say goodbye this way, it can end up feeling exhausting, but if we know to expect this in advance, we can prepare ourselves.

Speaking of goodbyes...Easter and Jesus' resurrection was six weeks ago and the story that we read this morning from John is of Jesus still saying goodbye to the disciples. That's right. Six weeks of goodbye stories—and there might be a few more to come in the weeks ahead. Guess which type of person Jesus is? For those of you who are more like me (the straight to the point folks or the avoiders) still reading stories about Jesus saying goodbye to the disciples might seem redundant or tiring. If this

was just some story, in some book, it would be redundant. An editor would take it apart and make the author choose one goodbye speech before moving on. But this is not just some story.

What we have been reading about, and continue to read about, is a glimpse of very real people coming to grips with being left by their friend and teacher. What we continue to see is a grief torn community struggling to understand how they will live without their leader, and how they are expected to carry on his work when he is gone. This goodbye is about loss and living after loss. Framed in that way, it is a lot more helpful for me to understand why it might take six or seven or eight weeks or even longer for Jesus and his disciples to say goodbye one another. It makes it easier to understand why we keep going back to these themes week after week during the Easter season.

After all, I'm sure we all have powerful memories of being left by someone in our lifetime. We were probably too young to remember the first time our parents left us, but maybe we remember the first time a dear friend moved away or the first time we left home. Or more acutely, maybe we remember when we lost someone through a breakup or we lost someone we loved to death. Unless you grew up in a bubble and were raised by robots, saying goodbye to a loved one is a universal part of being human. We all know what it feels like to experience loss. We all know the questions that go through our minds, the rationalizing and the bargaining, how everything we do both fights against the loss and simultaneously tries to come to terms with it. We all know the incredible amount of time that it can take as we move forward in our lives without that person.

Despite this universal common experience of loss I would say that as a whole, as a society, we fall more into the avoiders category of dealing with goodbye and its twin sisters, loss and grief. It's not something that we tend to do very well or very gracefully. It's uncomfortable and it is painful so we try to rush through it or we try to cover it up or we deny that it is even happening.

I think the unease with loss extends to the way that we react to someone as we watch them go through it. We sense their discomfort, and we want to make it better, which is why so often in times of grief and loss we end up saying *too many* awkward or uncomfortable things. We see pain and we want

to make it better, and so we are too quick to tell the widow, “Don't worry you will love again.” Or we mean well but don't quite get it when we tell the couple who's just had a miscarriage, “You can always have other kids.” We hear, “Time heals all wounds.” Perhaps, what if it doesn't? Or what if we're just not ready to think about healing quite yet? Loss and grief are uncomfortably painful. We can't take away that part away, no matter what we say or do, and trying to inevitably makes it more uncomfortable.

We end up saying things like this not to be cruel or hurtful, but because we are not taught anything better. We don't spend a lot of time talking about grief and loss. We don't spend a lot of time talking about what it is like to go through it, how we can support one another. We don't talk about how we can walk the journey beside someone, knowing that we are not immune, and that one day it might be our own journey to walk.

Jesus understood what the disciples would be experiencing when he left them. He knew they couldn't do it alone. He knew they needed something more to help them move through the pain and grief, to help strengthen their spirits for the years ahead. And so, Jesus gave them a gift. He gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that they might still feel his presence and his love, even when he is gone. He knew that it wouldn't make the grief go away, or miraculously make them happy. The Holy Spirit is not the guy your best friend introduces you to after your boyfriend dumps you, telling you that you'll like this new one a lot more. The Holy Spirit serves a very different purpose.

The Holy Spirit recognizes that even as Jesus leaves, and even as the disciples grieve, they will continue to have their lives shaped by the relationship that they shared with Jesus. Even though he is gone, he will still be very much woven into their lives. The impact he had and the way that he shaped the disciples lives cannot be ended by death. Jesus continued to live in them and through them. This is the Holy Spirit. And it doesn't diminish the grief, but it makes way for life after loss. It makes a way through and with the grief. The disciples can move forward knowing that even as Jesus is gone the Holy Spirit is with them, and so, they are not alone.

Here's another way to look at it: as Christians, relationship is a central theme of our faith. We believe we are called to be in relationship with one another, with our community, and with all of Creation. We believe in working together to enact peace and justice everywhere we go, and that the foundation of that peace is through relationships. It is because I believe in the power of relationships that I am able to understand that even as people have leave my life, they continue to transform it after they are gone.

I remember my very first best friend from preschool, Amy. I remember that feeling of someone welcoming me and saying, “Yes! I will hang out with you at recess!” and “You are welcome to join me on the swing set!” I remember the feeling of acceptance and comfort that came with that friendship. I don't know Amy anymore, but she transformed my life in a way that still reminds me to be the one welcoming other people. She reminds me to invite people to sit next to me on the swing set, at the potluck table, and in my church pew. She hasn't been a part of my life for 20 years, but she is still a part of me.

I also remember my stepdad, Joey, who died a few years ago. I remember that he struggled with maintaining healthy relationships his whole life. I remember how he spent the last year of his life traveling across the country, trying to make amends to people he hurt and trying to reconcile relationships with family and friends alike. He died at the end of that trip, in Montana with his best friend Steve by his side, but his journey still impacts my life. He still reminds me to live with the courage to face my demons, and to live with enough humility to be able to ask for forgiveness when I need it. He may be dead, but his grace lives on in all of us who knew him. When you love someone, and you have to say goodbye to them, you are called to take what you loved about them and what you learned from them, and carry it with you as you continue to live your life. They become a part of the light that shines inside of you.

And so it is with the Holy Spirit. Jesus understood that the disciples would have to say goodbye to him. He knew that they would grieve for his life. He knew that they would miss him. And he couldn't

change that. But he could offer them the Holy Spirit: the living reminder that Jesus' love would still be at work in the world, that the peace he offered would still be available for all, and that the power of his life and ministry would not disappear. And because the disciples shared their stories, because they passed on the love that they received from Jesus, the Holy Spirit still moves amongst us. Jesus' love is still present, breathing into us, and offering us hope, peace, joy, and above all else—love. The Holy Spirit is a living gift that shows us the ways we are transformed by Christ and reminds us that Christ is still at work in the world. Thank God for that gift. Thank God for the Holy Spirit.