

A Sermon by the Reverend John McDuffie
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2020

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.”

I expect that most of you know what an earworm is. If you don’t know, an earworm is a piece of music that gets stuck in your head and keeps repeating, over and over, after the actual performance of the music has ended. As an example, with the recent death of the rhythm and blues and rock and roll legend Little Richard, I listened to his original biggest hit, and got stuck in it :

*Tutti frutti, all Rudy,
Tutti Frutti, all Rudy,
Tutti Frutti, all Rudy
A wop bop b'luma, b'lop bam boom.*

I started singing it as I walked around the house, trying to exorcise it from my brain, until my wife told me to be quiet. Research indicates that women tend to have longer earworms than men, and are generally more irritated by them.

But I won’t say any more about Little Richard. In recent weeks, another piece of music has gotten stuck in my mind. I rediscovered a beautiful old folk song from the mountains of North Carolina. The song resonates with me deeply, perhaps because my maternal grandmother and her people were from the North Carolina mountains. It’s a song about farewells, and separation. It may have been sung frequently during the Civil War era, when soldiers were leaving home and going off to battle. It’s called “He’s Gone Away”, and here are some of the words:

*He’s gone away
For to stay a little while
But he’s comin’ back
If he go ten thousand miles
Oh, who will shine your shoes,
And who will glove your hand.
And who will kiss your ruby lips
When he is gone...look away, look away, over yonder.*

I find this song to be haunting, because we are living in this era of farewells, and separations. With extreme sadness, I hear stories of grieving people who couldn’t be physically present with a husband, a wife, a parent, a child, as they were dying from the coronavirus—who had to say goodbye, if they were lucky, with Facetime. I hear of front-line workers who can’t be present

with their children for fear of exposing them to the disease. I hear of isolated people, all alone, sequestered because of the pandemic. And it is a frustrating time for us clergy, who are called by God to mediate the presence and love of Christ with people in times of joy and felicity, and in times of crisis. We cannot be there to share joy, or to extend a healing touch, or administer the sacraments.

And, in this season of Easter, we all find ourselves moving into the remembrance of a time of impending separation. As always, the season begins on Easter Sunday with the shocking discovery of an empty tomb. Afterward, we hear stories of deep consolation as the risen Christ appears to those whom God had chosen to be his witnesses. We then hear Jesus proclaim that he is the good shepherd, who does not abandon his sheep. But then the anticipation of his departure, and the departure itself, take over the final three Sundays of Easter, beginning with the fifth Sunday of Easter last week. In her sermon, Mother Crystal did a splendid job in drawing a portrait of the disciples' uncertainty and anxiety about Jesus leaving them, as we revisited his farewell discourse, given on the night before his crucifixion. The farewell discourse continues today...and we are four days away from the fortieth day of Easter, the Feast of the Ascension, this coming Thursday. In the church where I served for almost twenty years, Christ Church, Rockville, there is a stained glass window above the altar, which depicts Christ ascending into the clouds. The eleven disciples are kneeling in pious prayer, and looking up as he is departing. I don't know what the creator of the window had in mind, but when I look at the disciples' faces in the window, they look very sad, and worried—as if they want to say, “Where are you going?” At the pinnacle of the window, above Jesus, is a dove descending-- the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit—but somehow it seems far away.

In the Easter season I sometimes think of what those who study human grief call “bereavement dreams”. I have had them after losing loved ones to death, and perhaps you have had them as well. In the time of my grief, the beloved person would suddenly appear in a night-time dream, bathed in a hazy light—and there would be a time of quiet but intense joy, as I would say, “You are alive!” But upon my awakening, the deep sense of loss and grief would return, almost with more intensity than before.

Years ago, one of my parishioners said to me, “What a bummer! Jesus was raised from the dead, appeared to the disciples, and then departed from them.” She sighed, but then said something that I've never forgotten—“I guess they just had to introject Jesus.” Introjection is something that analytical and developmental psychologists talk about. The example they often give is that of a child learning how to walk. With the encouragement of Mom and Dad, a young child takes his or her first steps. The parents are delighted! The child looks back at them, to be sure that they are there, watching. He or she continues to venture forth bit by bit, looking back to be sure that Mom or Dad is there. Then one day the child walks forth, not needing to look back, and that is because the child has formed an interior representation of the parents in the mind—a parental “introject.” Mom and Dad are there, no matter what.

What a gift this is! If we really think back over our lives, and take time to give thanks for all those who have helped to bring us to the place where we are, we realize anew that they are always with us, even when we separated from them, by distance, or even by death. We are never alone, because love is stronger than death. In an old favorite book of mine, The Human

Comedy, which was written during the second World War, Mrs. McCauley is talking to her five-year old son about the death of his father, and she says that the family won't see him in the same way as before, but he will always be there, because "Nothing good ever ends."

And so it is with Jesus. On the day of his Ascension, he said to his disciples, "Stay here and wait—you will receive the Holy Spirit." Today Jesus says to his disciples, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you".

He's gone away, for a little while. But he's comin' back, if he go ten thousand miles...

You and I continue to live at this time in a world beset with uncertainty and anxiety—and, like it or not, in many ways we are forced to wait. We wait for a clearer sense of when things will be safer, and we wait for a world that in some ways may be changed forever. But nothing good ever ends. Bereavement dreams—they're not just dreams, they're real! We who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ have become the children of God—And we will not be left orphaned. That is our sure, and certain hope.