

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Farewell... Not Really

Jesus leads his disciples to a spot on a hill outside of Jerusalem. This is Jesus after the resurrection, forty days after the resurrection. He has appeared to them several times already beginning on the first day of the week, the third day after his crucifixion. He has spoken with them, eaten with them, reminded them of all that he had said to them while he was with them. Now it comes down to this last moment. He is saying farewell. He is about to ascend into heaven to take his seat at the right hand of his Father. It is a moment fraught with anxiety and anticipation. What do you say in those last moments? How do you sum up a life-time of teaching? How do you give all the wisdom that is needed to sustain the disciples for all the challenges that await them?

It is not unlike the moment when parents drop off their child at college. Before you leave your child by the curb in front of their new dorm you want to say something wise. You want to give your child something to hold onto, something to remember. You want your child to know how much you love her or him, and that you will always be there for them. But what do you say? Neither a borrower nor a lender be? To thine own self be true? What do you say? How do you sum up a lifetime of teaching? Then you realize that you don't have to come up with the perfect farewell line. For one thing, you don't have to come up with a pithy farewell line, because you have spent their lifetime teaching and modeling the best wisdom you have to offer, trying to give your child the benefit of your experience. You can't teach in the last moment a lesson he or she hasn't already learned by now. The other thing is that you're not really leaving them forever. You're only a phone call away. Your kid will come home for breaks and

weekends, etc. It's not really farewell. The relationship continues. Yes, the relationship changes. In some ways it will never be the same. But this isn't really farewell.

That is the message that Jesus gives to his disciples in this final moment with them. He makes it clear that they already know what they need to know for now, and that he isn't really leaving them alone. When they ask Jesus to clear up the ultimate mystery, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel," he tells them that it is not for them to know the answer to that question. They can proceed in faith, knowing that God is in charge. That's good enough. When he is about to take his leave, Jesus' final words to them are, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." With this assurance, he repeats the promise that he will be with them always, just not in the same way that he is with them now. The promised Holy Spirit will come upon them, give them power, and stay with them to help, support, strengthen, and guide them. In short, the Spirit will be just like Jesus had been for them.

After these final moments, Jesus ascends into heaven before his disciples' eyes. Just like that, he is gone. Gone. Without a trace. Imagine the shock and the uncertainty. In the past 6 weeks the disciples have gone from seeing Jesus received by the people in Jerusalem as a triumphant king, to seeing him arrested, convicted, and crucified. One moment he was there, then he was gone. In mourning and fear they began to grapple with their loss when only two days later they're shocked again when the tomb where he'd been laid is discovered empty. Where did he go? Have they stolen his body? One moment he was there, then he was gone. Then, shock again. He appeared, not his dead body, but Jesus, alive! They see him. They touch him. They talk with him. They eat with him. He shows them his scars. Suddenly, so many things he talked about before start to make sense. Suddenly they begin to understand how very

near the Kingdom of God really was. Then, here on Mount Olivet outside of Jerusalem, it's all over, just like that. One moment he was there, then he was gone. It's no wonder the disciples are just standing there staring up after him as the cloud takes him from sight. They were suffering from shock, a kind of messianic whiplash... And what was that he said about a Spirit?

Jesus is gone. There is no body. There are no scars. There is no evidence at all. No way to prove he was ever even there. He is just gone. Such is the life of faith. We don't get proof. We don't get evidence. We are asked to believe based on someone else's testimony. We must believe in what we cannot touch, what we cannot see. We must suppress somewhat our human need for certainty and accept, at least on some level, a mystery we cannot know.

We know enough though. We have learned what we really need. Love God, love our neighbor. God loves us. The Kingdom of God has come near. These truths are enough. They can sustain us through the hardest of times. And in those moments of darkness and doubt, when we question what we know, and our faith falters, there is this presence, like a familiar yet totally other being. Sometimes it's a peace in the midst of turmoil that doesn't make sense. Sometimes it's a disturbance in our soul that shakes us from complacency and motivates us to action. Sometimes it's a sense of surety that a particular course of action is right even if we can't quite explain why in any rational way. Then we know. We know. It started with the testimony we heard, but it ends with this experience of the Spirit of God moving in our lives. It confirms somehow all the rest of it. We know it to be true. We know that presence that Jesus promised, that ongoing, never-abandoning, holy presence in our lives. He never really left us, not really.

In response to what we have learned by the hearing of the ear, and by the sensing of the spirit, and with the power that the Holy Spirit infuses in us, we go into the world to be Jesus'

witnesses. We testify to the power. We testify to the love. We testify to the transformative grace that has brought us this far.

That's when something truly amazing happens. We realize that there is a body, and we are part of it. It is a body that is very visible. We can touch it. We can watch as it does its work. We can participate in that work. It is a body that is animated by that same Holy Spirit we have experienced in our own individual lives. That spirit binds us together and makes us one.

This body also bears the scars of love, for love is always a risky thing. Love always makes us vulnerable. Love always has a cost.

Today we are in between. We celebrate the ascension of Jesus up to heaven and we await the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a time of anticipation, when we hold our breath waiting to receive the *pneumatos*, the spiritual power from on high. This week we are reminded that we live in an in between time—the time between when Jesus went away in the ascension and the time when he will return with power and glory. It is a time of waiting, but not a time of inactivity. This is the time that we are The Church. We are the Body of Christ. We are the incarnation of God's love.