

**5 Easter May 14, 2017**

**Saying Goodbye**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

According to an entry in the Urban Dictionary, it is the “second worst word in the human dictionary.” That second worst word is something that hangs over every spring here at Church of the Good Shepherd, even in this season of Easter, this time of celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. It is a word that can imply sadness, loss, and what Charlie Brown says, “always makes his throat hurt.” It is a word that can make a person realize they don’t know what the future holds which can be frightening and exciting at the same time. The word that contains all that emotion is the word goodbye.

Here at Church of the Good Shepherd we’re well practiced at saying goodbye, it goes along with our presence here on the University campus. We’ve said goodbye to our choral scholars, some we may see again, some we may not. We’ve said goodbye to students who graduated, and to those who have gone for the summer. Of course, there are the welcomes and welcomes back we will be saying in the fall when classes resume, but that does not diminish the goodbyes we are in the midst of. Ministry here is a series of greetings and partings, and saying goodbye is just as much a part of our ministry as welcoming, formation, liturgy, music and feeding is.

Which perhaps can make today’s Gospel reading especially meaningful for us, as we just heard a portion of what is called Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in John’s Gospel. In other words, we heard part of Jesus’ long goodbye to his disciples before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. Jesus’ goodbye isn’t just about Jesus leaving for some new adventure, or the next natural phase in his life, like graduation. He isn’t going to a new job or moving to a new town, Jesus’ goodbye is about comforting his disciples as he prepared them for a whole new way of seeing, encountering, and being in relationship with God.

You may have heard today’s Gospel read at a funeral. Since I’ve been ordained, this has been the reading most often selected by families to be used at their loved ones’ funerals that I’ve done. Usually because of that opening sentence where Jesus says, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled.” Those may be some of the most comforting words in all the Gospels, and it can be easy to see why someone would want those words proclaimed at a funeral, a time when comfort is deeply desired.

Because of that association with funerals, it can be easy to mistake these words of Jesus as being only about life in heaven, and not the new life on earth he was attempting to prepare his disciples to see and live into. That comforting and inspiring imagery about God’s house having many rooms can be as much about life after death

as it is about life after the life after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The word usually translated “house” can also be translated “household”, meaning far more than a building, but a community or family. Jesus’ words may be about preparing a way for all people to be restored to God’s family, to God’s heart which is big enough to include everyone. And those who follow Jesus are to show all people the way to God’s household.

It’s understandable if that sounds odd or confusing, because we heard the disciples were confused too. Thomas contradicted Jesus and asked how they could possibly know the way to God’s house, and Philip demanded Jesus show them God the Father. The disciples responded as many of us do when having to say goodbye to someone or something we want to hold onto, with confusion, contradictions, and questions. Perhaps they were feeling what the Urban Dictionary said about goodbye, how it can feel like the second worst word in the human dictionary, or the human experience.

Which is why I love how Jesus responded to their questions and challenges. Instead of giving his disciples easy or long-winded, complicated answers, explanations, history, doctrine or dogma, Jesus offered what he offered in his crucifixion and resurrection: himself. He reminded them of his relationship with them, and it is what they have learned or seen or discovered in that relationship with Jesus that will help them understand what happens next and decide how they will live into the new reality Jesus’ resurrection will create.

It is important to remember John’s Gospel was written long after the events of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension actually took place. No one was taking notes, no one transcribed the conversations or wrote verbatims to work through what should have been said. So the words of John’s Gospel were also words of comfort and support for those who were following Jesus after his ascension, which means they are words that can apply to us, to you and to me, to our ministries here at Church of the Good Shepherd and in our individual lives and all the holy places where those two worlds overlap or intersect.

As we encounter another season of goodbyes, any one of us might feel the same as the disciples: sad, lonely, worried or anxious for the future. Goodbyes can bring out questions or concerns for which there are simply no easy answers, and uncertainties that can trouble even the most steadfast heart, whether we are the person left behind or the person doing the leaving. Perhaps instead of answers, which can be cold comfort, or less than helpful, a better way to respond is the way Jesus did, with relationship, because that may be the way to begin to comprehend or see God’s love in any situation.

Preacher and seminary professor David Lose wrote that he does not know why his parents love him or why his wife loves him, in the end he realizes answering the question “why?” it doesn’t really matter because he has the relationships with them that shows him these people do love him by what they do and what they say. And that love they made known in their relationships has been influential as to how he loves them back. For David Lose, the love is something bigger than the relationships themselves, it is a connection to God’s love in Jesus, making those relationships holy.

Goodbyes are part of relationships, sometimes the goodbyes are small, like leaving your house at the start of the day, and sometimes they are bigger, like graduation. All goodbyes even the ones that feel like the second worst word, can be a way to show the love of the God, which is big enough for all people, and open to us all because of Jesus, whose deep relationship with God shows us goodbyes are both endings and beginnings. So, to any whose hearts may be troubled today, whether it is from saying goodbye or any other cause of concern, we have more than the comforting words of Jesus, we have the love of God in Jesus himself, Present to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion, which we will all share, in our relationships with each other, and the hope that is at the heart of every goodbye.

The hope that addresses the issue of what is next, how will we live, what will we do after the goodbye that can reflect Jesus’ resurrection. That is why we have this reading in the season of Easter, in this time of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, who in today’s Gospel gives the challenge to share his resurrection life with others, doing greater things than we can imagine. Actions made great not because they profit us millions of dollars or make us the biggest parish in the diocese, but by how they help show the healing love of God to the hurting, how they make room for the hungry, forgive those who hurt us, how a shared smile can give comfort and belonging, any of the small and large ways we make resurrection known in our relationships with one another and God and the community we are in the midst of.