

Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

John 14:23-29

There was a profound experience of leave-taking at St. Paul's this past weekend. Everything we profess to believe about life and death was put on display. And every emotion connected to loss was summoned. We held a funeral and burial service for our dear friend and sister in Christ, Lilian Marfo. There's nothing like being faced with that inevitability...death...like having it intrude into our lives and challenge us to lean on all the precepts of Christianity that we profess to believe. Death seems so final and in a very concrete way, it is. We will not see Lilian again in this life. But we have an entire faith system based on the fact that, thanks to Jesus, we will be reunited with her one day. We have not lost her forever. Nor have we lost our memories of her or our connection with her. We have simply lost her physical presence in *this* life which is a hard enough reality to absorb. The departure of someone we love and someone we are accustomed to seeing and physically having with us is heartbreaking. It won't come back and we know that, but what undergirds this entire experience, no matter who it is in our life, is our professed and profound belief that Jesus Christ has in fact taken the sting out of death. Jesus Christ by his own physical death and his own physical resurrection has shown us that life does not end with physical death. Jesus' example proved to us that a person does not stop 'being' when physical death occurs. That's a hard concept to wrap our heads around and an even harder concept to put our full trust in. This is where faith comes in. Do we believe all that Jesus told *us* through telling it all to his disciples? Do we believe all that Jesus showed us? Have we experienced Jesus' presence at crucial moments in our lives? Do we actually believe what we claim to believe? Those are not easy questions to answer even though we may be trying to do all of these things all the time. Actually staking our lives on the teachings of Jesus is sometimes a challenge.

What we heard this morning in the gospel lesson is part of a section of the Gospel of John that is known as the Farewell Discourse. Like every other aspect of physical life on this planet, Jesus is telling his disciples and us what to expect in the face of physical death and what to believe about resurrection and life everlasting. Sometimes that's just too much to chew on. Sometimes we need to have our own experiences with the power of the living Christ and the Holy Spirit and Almighty God in order to be convinced that all of this is in fact a 'a sure thing.' It takes a lot of courage and even more experience in living and conversation with God and Jesus to be able to SEE all the things that Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples and to us before he leaves the earth.

So, do you have doubts? Of course you do! Everyone has doubts...of all kinds. Even Mother Teresa doubted all her life that she was actually doing what God had asked her to do. She thought maybe she had misunderstood God and she thought that perhaps she wasn't doing a very good job at taking care of the abandoned souls of the world. From our limited vantage point it's hard to believe that she would ever doubt her own efforts or her relationship with God or the effectiveness of her persistent faith. But Jesus spelled all of it out for us when he began telling us "Good – bye." If you put your faith in him, you are on solid ground. If you surround yourself with other active believers you have the chance of actually experiencing the presence of God and the presence of Jesus and even the presence of the Holy Spirit. And that's the key: surrounding ourselves with other active believers; being part of a Christian community that is trying its best to live out Jesus' instructions.....even though 'the best' is sometimes not as good as it should be! It is by being willing to be an active participant in the Christian Laboratory called Church that we can actually live out the promises Jesus gave us. We can't do it alone. Sometimes Jesus comes to us through relationships with other believers. Does it always work out perfectly? Of course, not. We are frail and we sometimes stumble.

Sometimes in the midst of the most turbulent times in life an inexplicable sense of peace and well-being settles into our hearts and into our thinking. Without any effort on our part, we receive some relief from all that has been troubling us. Just by conversing with God on a regular basis, we have established an open line of communication with the Almighty God who created us in the first place. Sometimes God barges into a person's life, but very often God waits to be called before He comes.

Much of what Jesus tells his disciples in this Farewell Discourse in the gospel of John is beyond all comprehension...for the disciples as well as for us. The things Jesus says are hard to understand. They simply won't compute in our own limited brains and constrained hearts. It's very hard to let go and let God when we're not sure where or even if we will land safely. That's where faith comes in...and that too is hard to nourish and grow. There are too many concrete obstacles in the way...too many things that defy an explanation of our limited understanding of the universe, the spiritual world or the physical world and the laws that govern all that we see and all that we don't see. How can you trust what you cannot see? How can you trust what you do not understand? How can you safely lean into an emotional state that provides no guarantees about tomorrow?

When we were with Lilian's family and her friends yesterday, we couldn't prove to any of them that one day we will all be reunited with Lilian. We can't explain how that will or might happen, but when we believe in Jesus we know that it will. All of us have 'holes' in our lives...places that

have been left open for the ones we love who are no longer physically beside us...but are unquestionably beside us nevertheless. Most of us have felt this phenomenal connection in ways that we could never explain to anyone else. Even Jesus didn't explain it completely, but he did insist that we live like He had taught us to live. He did command us to love one another as he loves us. He did remind us that we had been shown little glimpses of the nature of God and the life that continues on after this one has ceased.

Jesus is still teaching us in this Farewell Discourse to his earthly friends and family...to the ones who had been willing to abandon everything in this life in order to follow Jesus.

Are we willing to do the same?

May God's peace descend on us and give us the courage and the determination of will to embrace all the promises that Jesus revealed to us while he walked the earth. It is a wonderful gift and a reassurance to know that this life is not all there is.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.