

“Jesus Alive in the Spirit”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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John 16:12-15

Welcome to Trinity Sunday! For Episcopal preachers across this great land, it is the favorite of very few, and I am not one of them. First, we’re celebrating a specific doctrine, one that’s essential and exceedingly complex, a subject more fit for a classroom than a pulpit, a topic better treated over 12 months than in 12 minutes. Second, the Trinity is baffling, confusing and it should be, because otherwise we would possess an idea that fully clarified the mystery of God. And were that to happen, then there would be no sacred mystery to worship and place our faith in. So here’s to the doctrine of the Trinity: suggestive yet imprecise; bizarre but beautiful; irrational yet true. And if you would like to know who’s chiefly responsible, look no farther than the Gospel of John.

Other books in the New Testament hint or briefly mention the Trinity, but without John there would be scant scriptural basis for the concept. John and the Trinity go together, because like the Trinity, the Gospel of John is suggestive yet imprecise, bizarre but beautiful, irrational but true. If you’ve ever tried to read John, you know what I mean. Today’s short selection is no exception, and what makes it worse is that we’ve been dropped into the middle of a conversation, and we all know how challenging and frustrating that can be. So sit back, relax, be patient, and please hold your applause to the end.

Like the other gospels, John’s basic project is to explain who Jesus is and what Jesus means. John pursues this in a fashion very unlike the other three gospels. For John, Jesus is the Incarnation of the Word that formed creation. John explicitly states this in the first few verses of

his gospel, but it's easy to miss or misunderstand because he uses the vocabulary of Greek philosophy to explain it.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” [1:1-4] Gorgeous, but what does it mean?

The key lies in what John means when he uses terms “Word” with a capital “W.” In Greek, it is *logos*, from which we get words like logical, but back then, it meant something more. Specifically, *logos* was considered by many Greek philosophers to represent the ordering principal of the cosmos. This leads to our second key, found in the opening verses of another book in the Bible. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . . God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

See the match? In the first chapter of Genesis, God spoke creation into existence. God said the word, the word became reality. God creates with the Word, and John claims that the Word of God's creation has become embodied in human form through Jesus. For John, Jesus is much more than a wise wonder worker from Galilee, much more than the revolutionary of Mark's gospel or the great healer of Luke and the new Moses of Matthew. The Jesus of John is foremost the very essence of God come down to Earth, fully human yet fully divine.

But Jesus came for only a short while, and this leads us closer to our passage for today. The very brief snippet just read comes in the midst of a much longer monologue that takes up about four chapters of John's gospel. We've been dropped into the middle of a conversation called the Farewell Discourse, because Jesus opens it by telling the disciples, in no uncertain terms, that he will die soon. Understandably, they were distraught.

For the disciples of John's gospel, the crucifixion meant more than the loss of a leader or a friend. It meant that the God they had worshipped since childhood, the God they had only recently come to touch and smell and walk with and talk to, God in human form was going to leave them. After a profound experience of intimacy, God would feel more distant for them.

Imagine the devastation they felt. We know how it feels to anticipate losing someone we love, and we know the gnawing sense of God's distance from our lives sometimes. I don't know about you, but I envy those disciples their time with Jesus in the flesh. Sometimes our tiny wafers and sip of wine feel like a poor substitute. We want to talk with Jesus and look him in the eye and get goose bumps by standing next to him. To some small yet sufficient extent, we know how the disciples felt.

Knowing their grief, Jesus promised the disciples that they would not be left alone. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . . and he will declare to you the things that are to come." The Spirit is known by many names in John: Counselor; Paraclete; Advocate. But the reality is the same. The presence of Christ will continue to dwell among the disciples even after his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension – only in a different way. When Jesus is no longer physically present, he will paradoxically be more pervasive than ever.

In the moment, that was probably not much comfort for the disciples, but over time, and especially in the wake of their Pentecost experience, when the Holy Spirit was revealed in a whole new way, the disciples gained greater understanding and found great solace and encouragement in the Spirit's presence, a Spirit that would "declare to you the things that are to come," alleviating a lot of the stress they felt about a future without Jesus physically present in their midst.

And what was good news then remains good news for today. Through the Spirit, Jesus lives. He is not a mere historical figure to be fondly remembered, and he will not leave us. Through the Spirit, Jesus dwells within us and among us. Through the bread and wine, he abides in us and we abide in him. Through the Spirit, we embody the living Christ. We needn't envy those original disciples. Reach out and touch the person in the pew next to you. (No, seriously, I want you to do it.) Jesus is in that person and inside of you and in places and people we might never imagine or want to admit.

If we as Church – and I mean Church with a capital “C,” the whole Body of the faithful worldwide as well as our parish – if we as Church have an identifiable central problem, it is that we forget or ignore this reality too often, because it just seems too good to be true. The world we live in has seduced us, by subtle and not-so-subtle messages, to settle for less, because it insinuates that our faith is ridiculous.

People aflame with the Spirit and filled with faith don't settle for less, because less won't do, and less isn't necessary. I know, because I've seen people on fire for God here and in many other places. I've seen faithful people aplenty, and let me tell you, they're an odd bunch, don't always fit in so well with the world we live in, and each and every one, in their own delightful way, is slightly crazy. It's so easy to listen to those seductive voices that seek to distract and satisfy us with promises of comfort in the place of peace and happiness in the place of true joy.

But the good news of Jesus in John's gospel snaps us out of what captivates us. It frees us from the bonds of an average, every day, ordinary, mediocre life. It opens our eyes to the truth, just as Jesus promised the Spirit would, and grants us renewed perspective. What John tells us in no uncertain terms is that with the Spirit, we will prove the world wrong.

We will show the world the power of resurrection, revealing lives filled with hope for the future, not fear. We will show the world the power of creation. We will show the world God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we will do our part to bring peace to an anxious and angry world, the light of life for all people. For “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” [John 1:5]

This is the promise given by Jesus. Let’s embrace it as fervently as we would embrace Jesus in the flesh if he walked into the room right now. In a few moments, after the Creed and the Prayers and Confession, we will share the peace, one of the most ancient practices of Christian worship, mentioned by Paul in his letters, which were written before the gospel writers even got started. We do the Peace well here. There’s an energy and sincerity about it. Today, when that moment comes, be keenly aware that Jesus dwells in your neighbor through the Holy Spirit sent by God the Father. Let that brief encounter be one of awe, because in each faithful person, the Trinity lives. Amen.