

Easter 6 (C)
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Text: John 14:23-29

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A friend of mine told me about going backpacking with some friends in high school. At the end of an especially strenuous day of switchbacks and long uphill slogs, they reached the spot where they planned to camp for the night. Worn out by the long day, they all just dropped their packs and collapsed on the ground. They were high up in the mountains, and the view all around was stunning. As the sun was starting to go down, some in the group began to describe the amazing view they were seeing. Way, way off in the distance they could see lights twinkling, a sign of just how far away civilization was. But no matter how hard he looked, my friend couldn't make out the lights. He squinted and stared, but... nothing. Then he looked at the others and realized that he was looking in a different direction than they were. He felt a little silly, but it made him laugh until his sides hurt. Of course he couldn't see the little twinkling lights. He'd been facing the wrong way!

That image—of being unable to see something because of being oriented the wrong way—helps me understand what Jesus is saying in our gospel reading for today. Seated at the table for his last meal with his followers, Jesus was preparing them for the time coming very soon when he would no longer be physically present with them. But not being physically present wouldn't mean Jesus was gone. Jesus explained that his followers would recognize him, they would know he was alive and present with them, even though the world would not. The world of people going about their lives in the self-concerned, maybe thoughtless or anxious way that people do—they are unable to recognize Jesus as present to give comfort or strength or wisdom because they are simply oriented the wrong way. Their lives aren't focused where Jesus is. Only those whose lives are shaped by love will be able to know that Jesus is alive and present.

I have seen this, again and again, in the lives of so many people I've known. There's a cluster of qualities that consistently go together. There's a commitment to Jesus' way of love for others, which goes with being deeply connected to Christian community, and also goes with a lively, joyful, hope-filled faith. I wonder if you can recognize that cluster of qualities in your own life—committed to Jesus' way of love, connected to Christian community, and a lively, joyful faith. That's what it looks like (on the outside), that how we experience the risen Jesus making a home in our lives. When the mystery of love that called the universe into being is at home within us, how could our lives be directed toward anything but love?

It's probably obvious that this is not about calling oneself a Christian or being a member of a church, since there are people in the news all the time who do those things, but whose lives are consumed with hate for perceived enemies and contempt for anyone who is different from them. They seem to be driven by greed or self-righteousness or a desire to wield power over others. The only thing that matters, Jesus says, is love—being drawn to and committed to Jesus and his way of love. Jesus' way of love looks like compassion for neighbors who are different from us and forgiveness for those who have hurt us. It looks like generosity toward neighbors in

need and conducting ourselves with humility. It means striving to treat every person who comes into our lives as a beloved child of God. That doesn't mean we can't operate with a healthy sense of personal boundaries, because love doesn't mean just giving ourselves away. It doesn't mean we'll always have warm, fuzzy feelings for all our neighbors, because love isn't just a feeling, and sometimes love is hard work. Being committed to Jesus' way of love doesn't mean that we'll always be loving and never need to seek forgiveness because we acted selfishly or thoughtlessly. Of course we will! But we'll recognize our failures because they don't measure up to Jesus' way of love. And we'll seek forgiveness confidently because we are confident in God's great love for us.

What's really interesting to me is how this leads Jesus to talk about the Holy Spirit—the presence of God among us that connects us to Jesus and to each other and empowers us to be God's people in the world. Jesus may not be physically present to guide and encourage us, but God gives the Spirit to keep us connected to Jesus and his way of love. Without this kind of connection—both to Jesus and to each other—we'd just be drained of energy by the bad news in the world around us, or co-opted by the world, so we'd wind up with a cramped little life that is only about us and our wants and needs and desires. For us, it's very much like what Jesus first followers needed. After seeing how Rome tried to put a definitive end to Jesus and his way of love, they needed to know that Rome had failed. They needed to know that God had vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead, and that through Jesus the power of love was still at work. We need that too, that love really is stronger than hate and death and violence. So, with the Spirit, God keeps us connected to Jesus and to each other, so that we don't lose that orientation toward love.

Finally, then, Jesus leaves a gift of peace with his followers—and this might be the most beautiful and most confusing thing Jesus has to say to us today. When we use the word, "peace," we often mean something like a cessation of war and destruction, or an end of conflict and violence. So we pray for peace in Ukraine, for an end to the fighting and killing, or we pray for peace on the streets of our city, for an end to gun violence. The peace Jesus speaks of might include those things, but he can give his gift of peace even when the world around us is going crazy, even when we are surrounded by conflict.

Another way we use the word, "peace," is to signify an inner state of mind, to be unworried and unperturbed. Maybe we imagine an absence of inner tension, a kind of tranquility and contentment. The peace Jesus speaks of might include those things too, but his gift of peace isn't merely subjective. It isn't limited to how we feel or our individual frame of mind.

The peace Jesus gives to us is what results when God sets everything right. Peace is the wholeness and completeness that comes with an end to all injustice and oppression. It's the dream the prophets envisioned and the hope that sustained God's people for the time when God's promised Messiah, the Prince of Peace, would bring salvation.

And here's the mind-bending, beautiful vision that the Gospel of John wants us to see. Even though the world hasn't caught up to Jesus yet, even though the world is tearing itself apart in

so many ways, even though there is grief and sorrow and pain in abundance, we can live NOW in the Peace that Jesus gives. We can rest NOW in the salvation that sets us free to live together with love and forgiveness. We can be strong and steady NOW because we embrace the Gospel promise right now that assures us that there is no condemnation, that in God's sight we are enough, we are beloved children of God, that the only judgment God makes concerning us is that we belong to God in love forever and nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. Right now, we can experience the healing power of God that makes us right with God and right with each other, because God has already spoken the final word for us and for this whole creation, and it is Love. It is Mercy. It is Compassion. It is Forgiveness. It is Grace. Whatever else might happen in this world, God has delivered the final verdict. It is Peace.

And for us, the key thing now is how our lives are oriented. The heart of the matter is being focused on Jesus and his way of love. There are lots of things that could distract and disturb and worry us, but Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Jesus has already dealt with death and fear and grief. Jesus has already dealt with evil and suffering and estrangement. So do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Just stay focused on love. Thanks be to God. Amen.