

I mentioned last week that John's author understands the end of Jesus' earthly ministry in three phases: death, resurrection, and ascension.

John's community also understands Jesus as an incarnation of the Word, the source or energy of God – somehow, someday, God is manifested in human form in the physical life of Jesus of Nazareth. And like all creatures, the physical life of Jesus is finite. The life that animates his body will expire; the incarnation will come to an end.

Jesus, in this morning's text, continues to prepare the disciples for the reality of his death. "My time is coming," he says.

Once more, we as readers of this text, must be mindful of its setting, as well as the liturgical setting we occupy this morning, the fourteenth of May, in the year of our Lord, Two-Thousand-Twenty-Three.

Jesus is speaking in a pre-Easter context. Think Palm Sunday or Maundy Thursday. We, on the other hand, are six weeks removed from Resurrection Sunday. Next week is Ascension Sunday. Then Pentecost Sunday. Then Trinity Sunday. And then Ordinary or Greening/Growth Sundays. Too many to count.

Therefore, as readers/hearers of these farewell discourses of Jesus, we have insight on what follows Jesus' death – we know that Sunday morning's coming. But we don't yet know what to do with an empty tomb, or strange appearances, and we don't yet know how any of this affects our future. Christ the Lord is risen, indeed. Now what?

First, Jesus will be resurrected. God, the parent, the source, the Creator, is going to respond to the world's alienation, not with vengeance, not

with retributive justice, but with love. The Great Parent is going to demonstrate life where we have only known lifelessness.

I would tell you that in any gospel, God's response needs to be audacious, and unimaginable, and unexplainable to have the desired effect of transcendence. Resurrection fits the bill. For me, resurrection, much like the ideas of angels and earthquakes to describe the indescribable presence of God, reveals the depth, the creativity, the connectedness, and the compassion God has for humanity.

Is there a greater void that we can experience as human beings than the void we feel in the death of a loved one? Death's sting is so final. So complete. So rigid. So stubborn. So unempathetic. And yet somehow, in this particular moment of history, God chooses to understand and share in our heartbreak, and for a fleeting season, removes the immovable void.

It's the mystery of mysteries. We often hear the phrase: "Don't miss the forest for the tree." I think sometimes we can miss the Incarnation, not to mention the Ascension, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, for the Resurrection. God raised Jesus. And yes, by all means, let's parse out for ourselves if we take the event of raising to be physical, or metaphorical, or something else altogether. But be it myth or truth, or even a little of both, please don't reduce resurrection to a parlor trick or a slight of hand. God didn't raise Jesus as a spectacle, or even a microphone drop for that matter. Because the story doesn't end with an empty tomb. There's something more.

Ascension is next. Last week, Jesus told the disciples, and us as well, that he's returning to the Source. The Child is being reunited with his Mama. Just as the disciples will experience the joy of reconnection with

the Risen Jesus, so too will the Great Mama Bear experience a similar joy of reconnection with Her Cub. There's a circuitous nature to our relationship. Our love permeates one another. The Source or Parent is in the Child, and the Child is in us, and us in the Source. It's not just that Jesus has been raised from lifelessness, but that Jesus is returning to the Source of all life, and in the process creating an even stronger, even more recognizable, even more present sense of love among God, humanity, and indeed all creation.

Today, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, we are anticipating the enhanced connectedness of Parent to Child, and ultimately, of humanity to Source.

We got a preview of this last week. This week, we get even more exciting news. The Ascension is going to bring with it an advocate. Jesus, as the human incarnation of God, has walked with the disciples for a temporary amount of time. But the Spirit of Truth, you and I commonly refer to this as the Holy Spirit, the Spirit is preparing to be present with us. Jesus is not abandoning us. Rather, a new, equally important, relevant, and timely expression of the Word – an advocate of truth and grace – is coming to join us. And this presence is going to transcend physical limitations. This presence isn't just a witness of God's truth, grace, and justice to the first generation, it's a witness, an advocate, a partner, a presence for every generation.

Let me stop here: A quick recap of everything we've heard in the last two weeks:

We are saying goodbye to the present incarnation of God in our lives, but we are by no means saying goodbye to the ongoing fullness and presence of God in our lives. Jesus tells us we have known the Parent or

the Source because we have known him. And Jesus tells us that he leaves us to expand his connectedness with God. And even though Jesus leaves us, he does not leave the disciples, nor any generation to follow, without the capacity to know and experience both him and the Source. And soon, very soon, a new advocate, the Holy Spirit, will join us, forever, to ensure the circuitous and fluid nature of love, truth, and grace that flows continuously in Creator and Creation.

I can't think of a better text for us to hear today.

These days, it's a good business model to condense the essence of God's love, not to mention the essence of a mother's love, into pithy, even exacting, and conformed statements on greeting cards. I don't believe that the Hallmark model is intentionally malicious or nefarious, but it often lacks a sense of empathy and creativity.

There is a vastness to God's character and love. We will never exhaust the myriad of expressions that can reveal God's depth. Nor do I believe we can exhaust the expressions of a mothering love.

I want to tell you that two things are simultaneously true at once. Today is a day of joy, for all of us who have been fortunate enough to be connected to mothering relationships. I can tell you I stand in awe of those who have offered mothering love in my life, and especially my own mother, grandmothers, and life partner. I know love more fully and clearly because of them.

But it's also true that today brings with it an untold amount of pain. There is grief from voids left by the loss of mothering figures in our lives, as well as the loss of those we've mothered, or never got the chance to mother. There is grief and pain associated with the roles we

hoped we might one day assume, or never cared to assume, not to mention all the ways our society shoehorns its expectations of value into narrow boxes. And if all of this wasn't enough, we also live in an era where the reproductive autonomy and wellbeing of all persons, both those who seek and do not seek parental roles, stands in perilous jeopardy.

Thank the heavens for the fluidity and creativity of the Spirit! The Spirit is genderless, classless, colorless, formless, timeless, even homeless. The Spirit is not bound to anything fleeting. The Spirit transcends any of the physical, and finite, and earthly things that occupy SO much of our manufactured assumptions. The Spirit has no concern for demographics. The Spirit tells us that love is gonna find a way.

The Spirit does not assign us a defined role to occupy. The Spirit meets each of us, just as we are, and unlocks the ability for us to love God, neighbor, and creation in the ways that are most congruent and authentic to our own selves.

Here's what I think today's text is asking us to do. It's pretty easy to identify, credential, and lift up a love that is clearly defined. Jesus loves me, this I know. Because I see him. And I hug him. And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.

But so much of what we experience is not defined, not binary, not precise, and exacting. The Spirit gives us the tools to engage what is fluid. We don't seek to define motherhood, we seek to acknowledge and affirm what is mothering. We don't define worship, or prayer, or Church. We seek to acknowledge that which brings us closer to God and

Now What?
Bob Stillerman
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John 14:15-21



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

one another, that which helps us to express our true selves. We don't seek to define love, we seek to value that which is lovely.

Good friends, whether we are ready or not, the Ascension of our Lord, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit will be here by month's end. We've got to decide if we want to use this coming infusion of love and connectedness to be biased by that which we rigidly define: people, places, structures, systems, outcomes. Or...if we want to use this infusion of love and connectedness to stretch the boundaries of what is possible: a world big enough for all kinds of mamas and daddies, and children, and churchgoers, and loveliness.

I'd like to seek out what's lovely. I sure hope you'll join me. Amen.