

SERMON 857

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 25, 2014

947th Week as Priest

773rd Week at St Dunstan's

38th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

BEYOND JERUSALEM

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Following our Lord's death, we were completely lost. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "we grope about like blind people. We stumble at noon, as if it were night, as if we were in the dark world of the dead."

It seems a lifetime ago that we entered the holy city in triumph and great acclaim. Our Lord was then hailed as king and messiah by all the people, and we, his closest followers, were considered great among them. And almost immediately followed rejection and betrayal, arrest and shameful death.

Much of what happened that week had the feeling of a dream, a nightmare, in all that unfolded and led to our Lord's passion and death. Thomas asked how God could have

allowed such a travesty. Philip said that justice was made a mockery of, God's Son was killed by evil men, and all of us, his faithful followers, were cast into darkness and deepest woe.

But then came a transformation, a confounding of the evil acts of those evil and misguided men. He, Jesus of Nazareth, was raised from the dead! We saw him, spoke with him, heard his voice, ate with him. He was truly *alive*, I swear before the one God. He was *alive*, no matter what you have heard.

You may say as others have said, that it was such good news as to be too good. Too good to be true. Too good to be real. And yet, I promise you, Jesus *was* raised from the dead.

It was, I believe, this central event, this conquering of death, that has become for us, his followers in the Way, the single unifying act of God which has transformed all of us from fear to courage, from weakness to strength, from broken spirits to brave hearts. We were made different, you see, by our witness to his resurrection—and we would never be the same again.

And yet, we were still just ordinary men—confused and disturbed about the future, still worried about our own course

of action. This resurrection was simply too marvelous to comprehend with our rational minds. On one hand, we were filled with joy and hope that Jesus was yet with us, and that all which had seemed untimely ended by his death was only beginning in his new and risen life.

But we were also paralyzed with fear and self-doubt, and the confusion and contradiction of those dream-like days and weeks. The Risen Lord, which we had already begun to call him, was now telling us of a new sequence of events which would take place very quickly. He said that we would find ourselves “beyond Jerusalem,” very soon.

Then Jesus said that he would be leaving us *again*—although he had just returned from death’s darkness and the power of hell. At this terrible news, we were more afraid and confused than ever! The Risen Lord, our rabbi, said that he could *not* stay, that he *must* go to the Father. Why or how none of us knows. All we understand at this point is that he died and now he is risen. But his death and resurrection did not bring the restoration of Israel, only the crushing words that he was leaving again.

Let it be known that we did not deserve his return from death—not in any sense. We fled at his arrest. We watched from the shadows at his trial and conviction. We could see his

crucifixion on the hillside. His body was indeed placed in a tomb. And then, miraculously, he appeared to us in the upper room, and at the seashore, and on the road to Emmaus. We touched him. We felt his breath and the strength of his arms. He was alive, indeed,

And now, says our Risen Lord, he must return to his Father. He will ascend into heaven, in some manner not unlike Elijah's chariots of fire—and we shall see him no more!

This is truly the worst pain of all; he has returned but will not stay. What shall we do now? And what, in heaven's name, will become of us?

The answer our Lord gave is a puzzle and a vexation to us all. Though he is leaving us, and is ascending into heaven, he will yet be with us—"always and even to the end," he said. Not one man among us understands what this might mean.

And more strange and mysterious promises: He is sending to us a Comforter, a Counselor, an Advocate. This "Holy Spirit," said Jesus, will teach us all things and will guide us into all truth. Do you understand this?

And so, indeed, we are like blind men groping along a wall, and we do not know what is around the next corner.

God the Father, YHWH, the Jealous God of the Desert, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, has always seemed remote, aloof, at times angry, and always utterly apart from his people. He is the Holy Other.

But God the Son *is* known to us. He is Jesus, our rabbi and friend. We know him and he knows us. Only now he is going away!

And now, says God the Son, there is to be a new person of God who will come to us. He will be the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus said that he and the Father are one. Now, we are to believe that all three are one God.

I feel like hiding again, just as we hid in the upper room in the days following his death on the tree. We are simply to wait, he said, after he ascends to the Father. Be patient and wait for the coming of the Spirit, a Spirit which we do not know. And so we wait, in this house, in this upper room—for the Spirit, Jesus said, is coming very soon. **AMEN.**

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