



Roanoke, Virginia

May 25, 2025

“Peace Be With You”

John 14: 23-29

Nancy Gray

This is the time in the church year when we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and look forward to commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Our scripture this morning is part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse, Jesus’ final words of personal instruction to his disciples. The passage takes us back to the night of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples, which we know as the Last Supper, before his arrest and crucifixion. Our text opens with Jesus’ response to a question about his upcoming leave-taking from one of his worried followers, Judas, but not Judas Iscariot. Hear now the word of God, John 14:23-29, found in your pew Bibles beginning on pg. 873.

Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me.

I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.



Imagine how that last night with Jesus must have felt to his disciples. They must have been worried sick about what was going to happen to Jesus, confused by what he was saying and afraid of the future. Fear, uncertainty and sadness were running high in that upper room.

When the time comes for someone we love to leave us, or as the death of a loved one approaches, we experience those same feelings. I sure did when my oldest son, Paul, went off to college. Paul is a bright, funny, “you never know what he will do next” person, but he had not been an easy teenager. Frankly, I was looking forward to a more peaceful household when he went to college, when I did not have to worry about where he was, who he was with, and what he was doing. The day for new first year students to report arrived and my husband, David, and I took Paul to the University of Scranton, to begin his studies. Paul had selected Scranton for its proximity to downhill skiing and because he thought their ROTC program, which interested him, was not “nerdy.” Academics and the fact that Scranton was a Jesuit institution had nothing to do with his decision. We helped him move into his residence hall room, met his roommate, attended the events for new parents, bought his textbooks and then sat around awkwardly making conversation. Finally, Paul looked at me and told me what I already knew—it was time for us to go. I tried hard not to tear up too much in front of him until David guided me away. I then burst into tears and proceeded to cry the whole way home, sobbing the entire two-hour drive. I was going to miss this challenging but wonderful first-born, and I was worried about what was ahead. And little did I know but this was just practice for the day four years later when our second lieutenant in the US Army was sent to fight in the invasion of Iraq.

Like the disciples listening to Jesus that night, when the time has come for someone we love to leave, we want to hold on to them tightly. But if we really love them, we have to release them. It is like giving our children both “roots to grow and wings to fly,” as the saying goes. Jesus was preparing his disciples for his imminent death. His disciples feared for him and did not want to let him go, but Jesus assured them there was a larger purpose in his leaving. Jesus told them that they should rejoice because he was “going to the Father” who was greater than he. As for the disciples, Jesus promised them they would not be left alone. Even though Jesus would physically leave his disciples, he would not abandon them. The Holy Spirit would be with them to remind them of all Jesus had taught them.

Just as this passage about Jesus’ love for his disciples reminds me of my son’s leave taking, this passage also evokes memories of my parents. Growing up, out of their love for my brother and me, my parents were strict. When I was a teenager, their insistence and enforcement of curfews made me come home on time, their admonition not to get into a car with anyone I didn’t know kept me out of serious trouble, and their expectations related to smoking, alcohol and drugs made me think twice. Their teachings and presence stayed with me even when they were not physically



present. And now, following their deaths, so often I feel they are still with me, reminding me to do my best, not to feel sorry for myself, to make a decision—the right decision once it is made. I can still see my dad greeting strangers and treating them kindly even as we rushed through errands when my mom was seriously ill in the hospital. And his blessings before dinner for those who have less than us echoes in my ears. My parents’ example of unconditional love lives on in me even after their deaths.

So, it is with our Father in heaven. We need not feel abandoned or be troubled or afraid. Although Jesus is not physically with us, he is present with us through the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father in Jesus’s name. In the gospel of John, we are told that the Father sends the Holy Spirit to be the continuing presence of Jesus alongside the disciples, reminding them of all Jesus said and taught. Because Jesus will be present with them through the Holy Spirit, and Jesus will be with the Father, his disciples need not be anxious.

Nevertheless, on that night in the Upper Room, his disciples could not really understand what Jesus was telling them, and they were scared. As Elisabeth Johnson explains in her commentary, only after the resurrection, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, do the disciples begin to understand, to believe the words of Jesus, and finally to rejoice.¹ Like the disciples who could not understand what Jesus was saying until after his resurrection, we cannot always understand what God is telling us in our time. So often, we do not understand what God is doing or not doing in our lives. We ask ourselves why something bad happened or how a loving God can allow dreadful things to transpire. Johnson answers this question by writing that “It is only with time and prayer and the aid of the Holy Spirit that we begin to see how God might be working for good even in the midst of terrible and confusing events. This is not to say that everything that happens is God’s will—but God is able to bring about good even out of the worst evil.”² Out of the horrible human act of crucifixion, through the resurrection, God triumphed over death and evil. And God is still working in our world today, even when we cannot understand or he seems to be silent.

While we may not be able to perceive how God is working in our times, he is present; he has made his home with us. His relationship with us is intimate and personal. As Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit stands with us IF we try to live as Jesus taught, as we join him in loving others in God’s kingdom on earth.

In our scripture today, Jesus tells us that “those who love him will keep his word.” If we truly love Jesus, we commit to obeying his teachings as expressed in our actions. Love is more than a feeling; genuine love prompts us to change our behavior. Our love for Jesus calls us to love others as he

¹ Elisabeth Johnson, “John 14:23-29 Commentary,” *Sermons and Biblical Studies*, Biblia. Work.

² Ibid



has loved us. And when we live out our love through our actions, our love for Jesus deepens and we grow closer to God. Jesus assures those who love him and love one another that he will be with us through his abiding presence.

Rooted in the transformative love of the Father, and guided by the Holy Spirit, we can find the courage to follow Christ, to keep his word, and to take the risk of loving others in a broken world. Rev. Dr. David Renwick, retired pastor of National Presbyterian Church, encourages us “to join with God in the messiness of the world and to be part of the solution.”³ While we cannot solve all the world’s problems, we can befriend the stranger, can feed the hungry, can care for these who are ill, and can go the extra mile for a neighbor. We can help build a Habitat house, provide a meal at Alexa house, read to a child at Highland Park Elementary School, donate food to the Presbyterian Community Center, and deliver flowers to a church member. We can wisely discern when to speak and when to be silent, when to let go of anger and forgive, when to be peacemakers and when, in the words of John Lewis, “to cause good trouble.” We can respond to Jesus’ love and actively love others as each of us is called to do. Our actions will be anchored on the foundation of our faith and love for Jesus Christ, led by the Holy Spirit.

In addition to sending the Holy Spirit to be with us as we seek to follow Jesus’s commandments and keep his word, Jesus gave us his peace. This peace—meaning a total, complete sense of wellbeing—is the gift of the risen Christ.

In the Afterword to the book, *Awe and Wonder*, following the death of the book’s author, Marcus Borg, Barbara Brown Taylor closes the book with these comments from Borg’s widow, Marianne:

“I’m so used to Marc being on the road, “she said, “I keep expecting him to come home.” She paused. “We were such a good match that I worried what I would do without his love. Then the other day while I was walking with the kids, I realized I still feel that love. I still have it—not in a sentimental way but at a molecular level. You know how Jesus said, ‘My peace I leave with you?’ We’ve all heard it. Oh, I thought, so this is what it feels like.”⁴

The peace Jesus offers to us is not the same peace the world offers. When John’s audience first heard this message, they probably would have thought of the peace offered by the Roman empire, Pax Romana. In exchange for loyalty, citizens were granted peace, strictly enforced by the authorities. As the dominant superpower of its day, Rome imposed peace on the Empire by dominating others through military strength and authoritarian rule, even by crucifying our Lord.

³ Rev Dr. David Renwick, “Peacemakers” Sermon, National Presbyterian Church, November 16, 2014.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Days of Awe and Wonder*, (HarperCollins, 2018), p. 245.



Like the early Christians, we, too, live in unsettling, difficult times. We look around and see wars, terrorism, injustice, homelessness, food insecurity, harsh political polarization and the list goes on. We may choose not to listen to or read the news too much because it makes us feel uneasy and anxious. Yet the headlines grab us and we realize we cannot hide.

Jesus, who promised peace to his disciples the night before his own crucifixion, never promised us a life without hardship or a world without troubles, but he did offer us a way forward through the gift of his deep and abiding peace. No matter what difficulties we face in our lives or what challenges the world presents, we can trust in the powerful peace of Christ that comes from the love of God. Unlike Pax Romana, and more than just the absence of conflict, the peace Christ offers is peace that resides deep within you, peace that “surpasses all understanding.”⁵ This is peace that gives you strength and enables you to survive whatever this life may bring and helps you to find the courage to stand up for justice and show kindness and compassion to others.

It is not this broken world, but Christ, who offers us peace. This peace does not come to us through winning wars, treaty negotiations or legal processes, nor from wealth and achievements nor self-help books and diversions, but through Christ. As blogger Craig Condon noted, “Christ’s peace is the kind of peace we feel inside us even when the world around us is falling apart.”⁶ Christ’s peace is with us as we endure life’s trials, struggles and difficulties. The peace of Christ quiets our souls, both when things are good and when they are not and gives us the courage to keep going. Elisabeth Johnson explains, “this kind of peace is a profound and holistic sense of well-being. It is a kind of peace which the world cannot give but can only come from God. This gift of peace accompanies the gift of the Holy Spirit, which, Jesus breathes into his disciples as he sends them out in mission.”⁷

Despite the brokenness of our world, we need not feel frightened or apprehensive. Jesus told us not to “be troubled” and “neither be afraid.” Like the disciples, we will face trials and difficulties, personal loss and pain; but by remaining rooted in Jesus’ teachings and love, like the disciples, we will find strength to continue his work to love others. “The Spirit assures us that we are never abandoned, even in the midst of the loss, pain, and sorrow that are part of life in this broken world,” Johnson writes.⁸ Jesus remains present with us and makes his home with us. As we seek to keep Jesus’s word by loving others, know that the Holy Spirit is with you and trust in the promise of the peace of the risen Christ. May it be so.

⁵ Philippians 4:6.

⁶ Craig Condon, “Sermons From My Heart” Blog, April 30, 2016.

⁷ Johnson.

⁸ Ibid

