

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

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## *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Today's gospel passage is part of what is known among scholars as Jesus' "Farewell Discourses" – chapters 13 through 17 of John's Gospel. They are Jesus' instructions to his disciples before his death and resurrection. Also, by extension, now they speak to us about the time when he would physically leave a second time.

We will celebrate the Feast of the Ascension on Thursday. If you haven't paused to wonder about this, it is worth spending some serious time to consider it. Two Sundays ago, I suggested that after his Resurrection, Jesus became someone different, a living Jesus who incorporates all of humanity in himself. Decades later, Paul would write movingly of the living Jesus he experienced on the Road to Damascus, in whom there was no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free – but all humans, united in this divine and human presence.

For those who did see him in the forty days between his Resurrection and his Ascension, they knew death had not conquered him. They buzzed with breaking news -- He is alive and the apostles and disciples have seen him, eaten with him, talked with him. And yet, he seems to move easily through doors and walls – they know him and they don't know him. But like Thomas, they say now with conviction: My Lord and my God! Jesus is being revealed more plainly now as the fullness of being human, and being more than human. And for everyone around him, it keeps getting stranger.

So, for Jesus to say, as he does in this morning's gospel passage, "I am going away, and I am coming to you," probably doesn't sound any weirder than what has happened and will happen to the disciples. You see, the problem is, he is speaking metaphysics in simple language.

Our great poets and scientists have tried to tell us massive new truths in simple language, too. Einstein's famous equation,  $E = mc^2$  says something about the relationship of matter and energy, but puts it in terms of mass and light, because those terms are somewhat closer to the reality Einstein understood. Scientists and physicists would gradually realize that energy, mass and light are in essence relational – but how to tell people?

Jesus is trying to tell his listeners something about the nature of God, and he and they are barely speaking the same language. First he tries telling them: "***The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.***" And he can see that this is not getting through.

Next Jesus uses the name God gave God's self when speaking to Moses. God called God's self "I AM." When Jesus says "I am going away and I am coming to you," we might hear "I AM" going away and I AM coming to you." How to tell his listeners about the relational identity of the Trinity challenges even Jesus.

In his book, *The Mind's Eye*, Dr. Oliver Sachs describes many ways in which the human brain, even when damaged by genetic flaw, disease or accident, struggles to create methods of coping with the challenges of daily life. One example is the story of a noted Physics professor,

who was dealing with advancing dementia. Although he could not easily tell time from an analog clock any longer, his mind retained the method of decoding it, and he could with difficulty work out what time it was.

He explained to Dr. Sachs that a clock has a triple overlay of meaning, and some major mis-directional cues. First of all, the part you are to read last – the second hand – is the longest and moves the fastest, thus attracting your attention. The minute hand is middle size and middle in movement. The hand you need to read first – the hour hand – is the smallest and moves most slowly. Then, you must remember that each hand functions with a different numerical base: the hour hand is base 12 (twelve hours); the minute hand is base 60 (sixty minutes marked by the little lines between the hours) and the second hand is really base 360 in terms of hours, but we change the calibration, and re-make it base 60, in terms of minutes (60 seconds in a minute.) So he could go through the complicated analysis of counting the hours, counting the minutes in a different base, and then counting the seconds in a third base, write down each number, and read them together to tell the time.

By analogy, we are like the poor Physics professor when we try to explain God's trinity of persons. We try to understand each one separately. Jesus could just "tell time."

The relational nature of the Trinity is as simple and clear to him as a glance at our clock is to us. So when he tells the apostles, "I am going away, and I am coming to you, he is making a statement that is simple and true in his understanding.

Yes, it is a mystery to us! Jesus says simply: "I and the Father are one" and "the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me." Our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds reel. We would rather have a digital clock, thank you, so that the numerical display keeps us from having to work out the relational issues of hours, minutes and seconds.

But for those who still like the many metaphors that our old-fashioned clocks give us, the relationality of the three hands is a reminder that the world we know is relational – made in the image of God by God the Creator. We have slowly come to understand that ecology and climate and cosmology are all relational studies. We humans are in relationship to the earth, and what we do affects our "island home."

Jesus' teachings remind us that we are in relationship with each other, and with God – and that relationship is built into the atoms of which our bodies and the cosmos are made. So you might want to keep an analog clock where you can see it regularly between now and Pentecost, when we will celebrate the Holy Spirit's coming among us. Let it speak to you of relationships – of time and the earth, of humans and the natural world, of God and creation.

And let it speak of the living Jesus, who wants to be in relationship with you forever.

*Amen.*