

Sermon Preached on May 13, 2007, Easter 6, 2007
By the Rev. Nancy B. Dilliplane
Christ Episcopal Church, Rockville, MD

In the name of the Father, God Almighty; the Mother, God all Wisdom; and the Holy Spirit; God all Goodness—One God of Love, Amen.

I am indebted to Julian of Norwich for that invocation. Her feast day, on May 8, falls in a timely way with today's Hallmark feast day—Mother's Day. I re-read Julian's book, *Showings* each year, and I love her rich and poetic way of speaking about God's and our relationship. "As surely as God is our Father," writes Julian, "so truly is God our Mother."

I find it helpful to imagine that it is Jesus, our precious mother, who utters the words that we hear in John's Gospel today. "Peace I leave with you, my own 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."

This text is especially appropriate on the Sunday before the Ascension, and it is also oddly appropriate to Mother's Day. In it, Jesus seeks to answer that almost primordial question we all have, no matter how frail or how powerful we are: Who will take care of us now? Will it all be ok?

In John's gospel, this conversation takes place at the Last Supper, as part of what is called the farewell discourse, and we hear it as Jesus talking about his immanent arrest, crucifixion and death. It is possible, however, that what John has really recorded is an encounter that took place between Jesus and the disciples after Jesus' *resurrection*, and that what he is talking about isn't his anticipated *death*, but his anticipated *ascension*. In either case, one thing is clear. Jesus is leaving the disciples. And though he tells them not to be troubled, I can imagine that they are very troubled indeed.

Especially if this is a post-resurrection story. What a whirlwind the disciples have been caught in! An arrest, a trial, a crucifixion, the death of their leader, the fear that the same fate may await them, a dead body, and then *NOT* dead, a resurrected Lord who is back among them, walking with them, showing them his wounds, breaking bread with them, fixing them breakfast. The disciples have, perhaps, started to calm down, to feel secure again, and now here is Jesus, telling them that he is leaving them—again. The joy of the resurrection so quickly replaced by uncertainty and fear.

Perhaps it is because my own time for leaving is coming so soon—next Sunday is my last Sunday with you—that I am very caught by the emotions of this scene. Leave-taking is always surrounded by uncertainty and fear. Change often causes us heart-ache and anxiety. It seems to me that Christ Church has been through a lot of leave-taking recently. It is *hard* to be at peace and not to be troubled.

Last week we bid Denise farewell for the summer; the week before, we sent John off on a 4-month sabbatical. Michele left for an extended time, just as the program year got underway. Karen has announced her retirement, and though we have more of her for the summer, we are already anticipating saying goodbye in October. Kathy Yaksich, Taffy Barrien and other longtime members of the Christ Church family have gone, too, entering, this year, into eternal life.

The warm May breezes remind us that it is the season for leaving-taking. Graduations—from preschool or from 8th grade, from high school or from college—all remind us that life is a series of bidding farewell to time and place, of growing up, of moving on, sometimes with excitement, sometimes

with trepidation, for unknowns that lie ahead, and often with the grief of parting from what we have known and those we have loved.

And, of course, today is Mother's Day. Despite the joy and celebration, I'm always a little ambivalent about Mother's Day, because it is often fraught with conflicting emotions for so many people. And isn't *motherhood* an ongoing series of leave-takings? Those of us who are mothers know that we bring our children into the world, only to bid them farewell, as they leave for school, as they leave our homes, as other relationships claim priority in their lives, as we sometimes even bury them. Or perhaps we must say goodbye to the idea of motherhood, or come to terms with the end of the dream a particular *kind* of mother/child relationship.

Those of us who *have* mothers—and that's pretty much all of us—know that as children, too, we are always about the business of leave-taking—as we seek to lead our own lives, as we watch our mothers age, or change, or die. Or as we say goodbye to the mothers we *wish* we'd had.

And so it seems to me that, in today's gospel, Jesus, our precious mother, is speaking to all these leave-takings, farewells, and movings-on. This curious

space and time between his resurrection and his ascension is like, really, the space and time we human beings naturally occupy—we are always saying goodbye, even as we are arriving. And in this sea of life's changes, Jesus is offering us a relationship that is eternal—life in the love of God, through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is telling his disciples that leave-taking is necessary. And *his* leave-taking is the means by which all other leave-taking finds its meaning. Only by Jesus' ascending to the Father is the coming of the Holy Spirit made possible—the One who comes to be our companion in all of the leave-takings and in-between times of our lives.

Because Jesus has ascended to the Father who is greater than he is, God is able to reach out across the world and across time by sending the Spirit. That same Spirit brings Jesus' presence to those long-ago disciples, to us as we gather this day, and to those to whom we have said good-bye for a time. As we keep Jesus' word and engage in his mission, we are all drawn in the Spirit's tether.

And *if* the Holy Spirit makes the power, love and presence of Jesus available to the disciples, and *also* makes the power, love and presence of Jesus available to us, and *also* makes the power, love and presence of Jesus available to those whom we no longer see, then, we are all united in his power, love and presence, and we can never really take leave of one another in any final sense. In the words of the hymn, the Spirit knits our friendships up into the whole cloth of the life of God.

The coming of the Holy Spirit answers the longing of our Mother's Day hearts for a Mother who will abide with us and never leave us. To return to Dame Julian for a moment, it is the Holy Spirit who is the guarantor of God's promise that all will be well and all shall be well and all manner of things will be well.

In all our leave takings, Jesus promises that we are still bound together in keeping his word, and in the Father's love, and in the Spirit's peace. Despite the leave-takings that are constitutive of our human existence—between death and resurrection, between resurrection and ascension, between ascension and Christ's coming again, Jesus, our precious mother, promises that we are all, throughout time and space, and despite our imperfections,

and disappointments and losses, held fast in the eternal and perfect love of the triune God.

So be at peace and do not let your hearts be troubled. For I, like the Apostle Paul, am persuaded that neither death, nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our precious Mother. Thanks be to God! *AMEN*