

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 27.iv.2008, 10:00 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
**Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21**  
Holy Communion, ELW - Setting 5

## Jesu Juva !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who  
was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."**

**--John 14:18-20**

The Disciples never knew they belonged to Jesus and His Spirit, to the Father He taught them to call their own, as on the day of His Crucifixion and death. They never knew the depth of their love until they felt that love in separation.

In today's Gospel, the Risen Christ refers to His Ascension to the Father and to the coming of the Holy

Spirit, to His going away, *and* to His being present through the Holy Spirit and to His second advent, His ‘coming again,’ what the New Testament and theology call in Greek the *parousía*. Already, while He is standing among the Disciples locally, as present to them as you and I are to one another, He says to them in the present tense, “I *am coming* to you.”

This coming and going of the beloved, this almost unbearable experience of separation, is a common human experience to which we can all relate. The great Flemish singer and song-writer, Jacques Brel, portrayed this experience in his world-famous song, in French, *Ne me quitte pas* (‘Don’t leave me’), in his native Dutch, *Laat me niet alleen* (‘Leave me not alone’), known to most English-speakers through the Rod McCuen lyrics, “If you go away.” Most of the renditions of this beautiful song are

melodious, especially when the song is sung in French. This is true of Jacques Brel's own recordings of the song in French. But, when the composer sings the song in the harsh cadence of his mother tongue, the tempo becomes progressively slower, until the singer is no longer singing but talking, as if in a stupor, barely able to speak, barely able to breath. That is what he is saying about the beloved, a beloved who, it is clear from this interpretation of the song, has already *gone away*. The singer begs to see the beloved, so as to be able to see, to speak with the beloved, so as to have something to say, to be the shadow of the beloved's, or even of the beloved's dog, so as to have a reason to be. The Flemish version of the song, sung by its composer, ends in a prolonged and haunting silence.

*That* is separation from the one we love and who loves us. If you have not experienced it, that is either

because you have not loved or you simply have not lived long enough. *That* is the separation the Disciples experience under the Cross, until Mary Magdalene hears her name spoken as no one else speaks it, until the Risen Christ *breathes* on those who have lost Him—Is He a shadow on the wall of the locked room, or did He pass through that wall and past that locked door?—until He gives them His Word of forgiveness to speak to others; until He gives Peter and all who left *Him* the second chance to express their love for Him: “Do you love me Peter . . . Do you love me as much as you love these fish you like to catch? Lord! You know I love You! Well then, Peter, feed my lambs, feed my sheep.”

The Church confesses and we believe and teach that the Living God does *not* leave us orphaned, even if we are bereft of parents or other loved ones, and that, where only

an emptiness of sorrow, and emptiness where hope and joy should be, an emptiness where love should be, a Spirit large enough to fill the greatest and darkest chasm, a Spirit *Holy*, ‘healing’ enough to cure the deepest wounds is there for us and for all.

Why, then, do we experience that *pain* of separation, even where there is the conviction of love that is greater than any distance, than death itself, the pain of missing the ones we love, the home we love, the pain, ultimately, of missing the God in Whose image we are created and sustained? A young woman, barely twenty years old, wrote this question in her own words to her fiancée in his prison cell, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “If God were to remove this pain from our hearts—a pain I also feel as deeply as you—then we would lose the clearest sign that we belong to each other, the clearest sign that we

are *with* each other in one spirit of one love. Is it not so?”

✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.



**Soli Deo Gloria!**