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Easter 7C
Peace, Seattle
May 8, 2016
John 17:20-26, Acts 16:16-34

SAYING GOOD-BYE

How do you say good-bye?

In my family, growing up, goodbyes were—as a rule—short and sweet, not the long, lingering affairs of some. A handshake and a quick hug and we were soon in the car and heading down the road.

Of course there were exceptions to the rule, depending on whom we were departing from and how long it might be before we were to see each other again. But, for the most part, Kindems don't linger.

I'm not sure why this is. Maybe it had to do with the fact that getting all eight of us kids corralled and into the car was a hard enough task. I don't know.

It wasn't until marriage exposed me to very different ways of saying goodbye that I realized there could be other ways of going about this ritual of leave taking.

How do you say goodbye?

For Jesus, preparing to leave the community he had gathered and led for three years, saying goodbye seems to have been a long process.[1] Almost from the beginning he gently, or sometimes in exasperation, told his followers that the path set before him would lead to profound changes in their lives, too.

So he began to say goodbye early. John's gospel devotes four whole chapters to his final farewell. In those chapters, we hear the anxiety of his disciples in the questions they raise:

- LORD, WE DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING. HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY? pleads Thomas.
- LORD, SHOW US THE FATHER AND WE WILL BE SATISFIED, demands Philip.
- WHAT DOES HE MEAN, they ask each other, WHEN HE SAYS, 'A LITTLE WHILE AND YOU WILL NO LONGER SEE ME, AND AGAIN A LITTLE WHILE, AND YOU WILL SEE ME'... WHAT IS HE TALKING ABOUT?

Jesus uses many images to describe his relationship to his disciples and what is going to happen, conjuring up in my mind, at least, the scene of parents giving last minute instructions, warnings, affirmations, and advice as they say goodbye to their college-bound son or daughter.

You find yourself beginning that farewell discourse and then it dawns on you:
IF SHE HASN'T CAUGHT ON YET, IF I DON'T TRUST HIM TO HANDLE THIS BY NOW, THEN A FEW LAST MINUTE WORDS OF ADVICE AREN'T GOING TO HELP.

Yet, Jesus hangs in there, amid their questions, their anguished looks and puzzled expressions. Because there is one central message he wants them to grasp more than anything else: that God is love, that it is for love that he came into the world, and that love is their destiny, too.
He says it, finally, in a prayer, which both they and we overhear:
RIGHTEOUS FATHER, THE WORLD DOES NOT KNOW YOU, BUT I KNOW YOU;

[1] I'm indebted to Amanda Wright's comments in framing this section as a "Long Good-bye" in *Living by the Word*, Christian Century, 5-18-2004.

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AND THESE KNOW THAT YOU HAVE SENT ME. I MADE YOUR NAME KNOWN TO THEM... SO THAT THE LOVE WITH WHICH YOU HAVE LOVED ME MAY BE IN THEM, AND I IN THEM.

Someone once said that from the moment a child is born parents are learning to say goodbye.

We watch them grow and change; we thrill at their first-time experiences and achievements, and as their worlds expand and their capacities increase, we say goodbye to some of our routines and methods, and renegotiate new boundaries in order to keep the relationship appropriate and life giving.

We let go of the old to embrace the new.

Sometimes, our letting go is an exuberant YES! As when diapers, and all that goes with them, are no longer necessary.

Other times, our letting go feels more like grief. As when a newly won independence signals the end of a closeness we are not ready to let go of.

"Remember that I was always with you," says Jesus, *"but that soon I will be with you in another way."* Say goodbye to the old way.[2]

In our second reading, this theme of letting go of the old and embracing the new continues. When a slave girl fortune teller annoys Paul by following him around and broadcasting his intentions, he finally commands the spirit to leave her, which it promptly does.

That means no more fortune-telling, no more payments to her masters, no more words from people desperate to have some control over their futures. They have to say goodbye to all that.

The slave girl has to say goodbye too, to her old way of being in the world. To the fame and favor that her fortune telling brought her. She stops being "the slave girl who tells fortunes." She has to say good-bye to the role she has played. Who she might now become remains an open question.

The liberation of this slave girl has consequences for Paul and Silas, too.
They must say goodbye to their freedom as they are beaten and thrown in jail.
Freedom for her means imprisonment for them.

But being in jail, for Paul and Silas, is nothing new. So when they feel the cold iron around their ankles and when they hear the door lock, their thoughts turn not to despair, but to hope.

Luke tells us they prayed and sang hymns. That their voices reached through the bars and doors and walls and they became witnesses to the other prisoners. There was a power at work in their lives which no manmade prison could contain.

Prisons come in many sizes and shapes. The body can be a prison, when it no longer functions how it used to. The mind can be a prison when we get stuck and we can't escape dark memories or regrets; we can't move beyond a soured relationship, a poor decision, a foolish choice, a shattered dream.
Yes, we are prisoners, too. And this morning we are among those others who overhear Paul's songs of praise; who overhear Silas's prayer that God would surround them and accompany them even there in the dark, dead-end places in which they—in which we—find ourselves.

[2] Ibid.

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And true to God's promise, God does come! The foundations of the prison are shaken, the doors are opened, the chains unfastened.

Maybe we expect Paul and Silas to make a run for it—head for the border, like bandits in a "B" movie. But that's not what happens.

These slaves of the Most High God know that true freedom lies in sharing the life they have come to know with others.

The jailer, seeing the doors opened, assumes the prisoners have escaped and that his life is forfeit. But Paul shouts to him—WE'RE ALL HERE!

BUT YOU WERE BOUND IN CHAINS, cries the Jailer, AND NOW YOU'RE FREE TO ESCAPE!

NO, Paul tells him, WE PRISONERS ARE FREE AND YOU, OUR JAILER, WERE CHAINED. BUT NOW THERE IS A WAY YOU, TOO, MAY BE FREED.

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE FREE LIKE YOU? the jailer asks.

PUT YOUR TRUST IN JESUS, comes Paul's reply, and before you know it, the jailer is kissing his old life goodbye and bringing his whole household, rejoicing, into the family of faith.

"By the end of the story, everyone who at first appeared to be free—the girl's owners, the judges, the jailer—is shown to be enslaved. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved—the poor girl, Paul and Silas, is free."[3]

Who could predict that this story, which started with Paul wanting to get rid of this annoying girl, would end with the community of Christ being extended outward yet again?

And who can predict the end of your story? Who can predict how God is working right now, today, in your life, turning what may feel like a dead-end into a new beginning?

I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED, Jesus tells his friends. YES, YOU WILL WEEP AND MOURN; YOU WILL HAVE PAIN, BUT YOUR PAIN WILL TURN INTO JOY.

This is Christ's promise to us, sisters and brothers.
A promise that waits at each intersection and transition of our lives.

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."[4]

This is good news worth living and worth sharing. May God give us the grace to do just that. Amen.

[3] From William Willimon, ACTS. Interpretations Series Commentary. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) p. 140.
[4] Jeremiah 19:11