

Message for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C (5/15/2022)  
John 13:31-35

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!

We repeat that beloved call and response Sunday after Sunday, of course, because Easter is not a day, but a season. If our journey to the cross with Jesus takes place over several weeks, then our celebration of his resurrection should last at least as long, shouldn't it? In fact, Easter is longer than Lent – fifty days as opposed to forty. If you're doing the math, that's seven weeks, and thus seven Sundays. So, to put it another way, "Easter needs a whole week of Sundays to celebrate."<sup>1</sup> And, since today is the Fifth Sunday of Easter, that's like Thursday in the church's great annual festival of the resurrection.

How fitting, then, that our Gospel from John today echoes the Gospel that was assigned for Maundy Thursday. At first, it might seem strange to lift a passage of scripture from the time before the crucifixion and set it in the context of the resurrection. But, that's the gift of our Easter perspective; Jesus' teaching prior to his death takes on a new significance as we work out what it means to share in his risen life: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

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<sup>1</sup> Sundays and Seasons Day Resources for Sunday, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022,  
[members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources](https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources).

At the Last Supper, this new commandment sounds a lot like parting words, the kind of enduring message a dying person insists on leaving with their loved ones. It's as if Jesus says, *Listen to me now: above all else, love is what I want for you*. He's only just watched Judas walk out the door to betray him, and only moments later, he'll predict Peter's threefold denial. Of course, all the disciples will scatter in the end. So, Jesus would be justified in taking this opportunity to tell them off, wouldn't he? Disappointment must sting even worse as death looms. But, instead of lashing out, he doubles down: *I love you, so love each other well when I'm gone. That will be my legacy*.

And, if the cross were the end of the story, Jesus' words at the Last Supper would be beautifully tragic, a bittersweet memory of his devotion to his friends, and an inspiration to love as he did. Nevertheless, the disciples would be on their own, and the memory would be all they have left. What does Jesus' commandment mean, however, once Easter has come to pass, once we learn that the love of God has the power to overcome death? When we recall his words in light of the new hope that Easter brings, what aspect of resurrection life comes into focus?<sup>2</sup> "Love one another."

If Jesus is "glorified" in his crucifixion and resurrection, to use John's language, if he "lays down his life for his friends"<sup>3</sup> only to be reunited with God in newness of life, then the operative reality is love itself. God is Lover, Beloved, and

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing James Alison, Preaching Peace Tacoma table, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> John 15:13.

Spirit of Love all at once. The cross and empty tomb together signify that love is God's defining attribute, and the means by which God relates to the world. It is for love that God sends the beloved Son in the first place,<sup>4</sup> that we, too, might never be separated from the love of God, neither by death nor life, neither by things present nor things to come.<sup>5</sup>

Easter thus provides a whole new insight into Jesus' commandment to love as he loves. It isn't just an echo of his dying wish, but an invitation into his risen life. Jesus' phrase in Greek can also be translated "I have loved you *in order that* you also love one another."<sup>6</sup> That is to say, Love – the love that death can't kill – is the wellspring of every love, and to love is to partake in the reality of God: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."<sup>7</sup>

This idea may sound familiar to us, but it scandalized the Roman world. No reasonable pagan would have dared imagine that any god would look on the world with affection, much less express that love through suffering. Neither would a god involve mere mortals in its divine purpose.

Yet, that very conviction informs the way of Jesus from the beginning. Sociologist Rodney Stark contends that the church thrived in its earliest phase in part because Jesus followers faced hardship with sincere faith and love. In the middle of the second and third centuries, deadly epidemics swept across the Roman Empire, killing as much as a third of the population. According to various

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<sup>4</sup> John 3:16

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 473.

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:16b.

accounts, the fledgling church responded to the sick in a markedly different way than the pagan majority.

Roman theology could not abide the absurd notion that God loves the lowly human being, and that God's own love is revealed in our love for one another. Nonetheless, it was that love that inspired Jesus followers to care for the sick, even at the risk of infection. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, reported that "most of our [kindred in Christ] showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another."<sup>8</sup> Since even basic nursing might have dramatically increased rates of survival, minority Christian networks likely attracted surviving pagans with the promise of belonging and care. And, as the church grew over the centuries, we never lost sight of that commitment; to this day, Christianity prioritizes healthcare as a means of manifesting the love of God.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." At Easter, Christ is raised by love, and by love he becomes known to the world. So, never underestimate the power of love, friends, even if it doesn't seem to make a difference. The promise of Easter is that even the simplest compassion, even the least kindness, even the most basic commitment to solidarity carries the weight of resurrection.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!

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<sup>8</sup> *The Rise of Christianity*, 82.