

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
May 7, 2023  
John 14: 1-12

This is not our first graduation. I think of Abby's end of year circus performance at Dandelion preschool in Catskill, NY. It marked the end of Abby's preschool and the beginning of her performances. I think of Hudson graduating preschool in Princeton with his little black robe on and him wiggling all over in the chair unable to pay attention, his body motions doing their own thing, out of sync with all the others. We've had moving up programs from grade school to middle school, one 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, another one coming up in a few weeks. I've certainly had more than my fair share of graduations.

But with Abby graduating high school, this feels different. I'm more aware of the dramatic changes this means, more than other graduations. There is much that is coming to an end, more changing, new things emerging, the past more obviously unrecoverable.

Richardson's poem this morning drones on about things coming to an end, things coming apart, so much so that we might feel it drifts towards the depressing. "Ok, we get the message," we might be thinking. But as we consider new starts and exciting new beginnings, and new opportunities, sometimes there is an equally intense sense of what is being left behind, of the circumstances that force one into a new direction. And when we find ourselves in such a transition, what comfort or confidence do we rely on?

Our gospel reading emphasizes such a transition for the disciples. This passage is set in the period leading up to Good Friday, to Jesus' betrayal, crucifixion, and death. A disproportionate share of John's gospel focuses on the events leading up to and surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. Chapter thirteen featured Jesus washing the disciples' feet on that Holy Thursday. Already, in John's narrative, things are intensifying. Jesus is doing something new, but the new will involve a lot of change, certain realities and patterns are ending, and it will be daunting at first for the disciples to follow this new trajectory. Jesus is signaling that he will leave them at some point.

What graduations or transitions are you experiencing or remembering or anticipating? The ending of one thing, an irreversible shift, anticipating new patterns, new realities. As you get older and older there are less ceremonies for these things, but certainly more shifts and changes. Aren't there?

For Jesus' disciples, their constant guide and companion is going away. Jesus is forecasting his death, forecasting a time when he would not be with them in the same way. It must have been both confusing and terrifying. Hard to imagine how they could possibly carry things on without Jesus present. It must have felt as if it all would end if Jesus was not present, alive, leading them in the flesh day by day.

I imagine Jesus' words about his death and departure from them were words they could only accept and process after the fact; after Jesus had died, and they had endured the dark night. But even so, the one they had physically followed and looked to for leadership, though risen, is now elusive, showing his face in select moments, and then disappearing. And he will leave them again. While they may have been relieved to know Jesus was risen and alive, their lives are still enveloped with uncertainty, with the unformed realities of whatever life and faith and worship mean post-Easter. It was a terrible time to be left alone.

I have a memory of going squirrel hunting with my dad. I was young. I didn't really hunt, but followed along unarmed. I suspect I wasn't quiet enough to sneak up on the squirrels, so he had me follow at a distance. Dad had a set of hand signals. He would walk ahead, and I would follow some ways back. He would wave me to come a little further and to stop. And sometimes he would go around a bend, or behind trees, and I would stand there, a little nervousness growing the longer it went before he would pop back out of the trees to wave me along. Standing by myself in the woods was not why I went out there. It was to see squirrels and to be with dad. When Jesus talks about his departure from them while they are in the midst of great uncertainty, and when the reason they came on this adventure was to follow him, it likely made them nervous too.

So, I find Jesus' words striking in the way he seeks to comfort his disciples. He speaks in terms that evoke a betrothal ceremony. It would be like Jesus saying, "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health." If he spoke such words, we would quickly recognize the verbiage and would pick up on how Jesus is bringing the experience and connotations of those words into the setting.

While we are familiar with the ceremonial aspects of a wedding, of the pronouncement that makes one married and all the tradition and fanfare that goes with it as well as the accompanying promises, in the ancient Israel and other traditional cultures, there was a prior ceremony called the betrothal ceremony. In the betrothal ceremony, the groom declares his affection, commitment, and his desire to take this woman as his wife. But he also has to present a plan for how he will care for and take care of his future wife. Where will they live, how he will

provide? He comforts the family and evokes confidence by giving a suitable explanation of where they will live, of what preparations he will make for their life together, and when he will return and take her to be with him.

The promises of the betrothal are followed by a separation. That separation will culminate in a wedding and in the ensuing life together, in the room prepared for them.

To his concerned and bewildered disciples who came along to be with him, and who would love to rest in his physical presence, Jesus says this, evoking the language and the promises of betrothal: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

Yes. I am leaving you for the moment, at least physically, in a time when you yearn to be with me. But I have not left you alone, and I am still working on your behalf, even though you may not see me. And I will not abandon you. Rather, I will come to fulfill and gather you.

Jesus says I go prepare a place, and furthermore, you know where I am going. And Thomas, our beloved straight shooter, says, “no we don’t!” We don’t know where you are going or how to get there. Philip too, is not satisfied but wants more information and assurance and comfort.

They want answers and information and to know how things are going to go, and how it is going to end. Perhaps you can understand how they felt. Maybe you can relate. But Jesus has given all the detail he is going to give at this point. His response to Philip is this: “Have I been with you all this time... and you still do not know me?”

Jesus’ response reminds me of another experience as a kid—of being asked a question in school and having a strong sense that the answer was discussed in the time I had drifted off daydreaming. Oh no, I asked a dumb question, and you start rewinding to find the answer in what you already know, hoping the answer is in there somewhere. For we who follow Christ in a post-Easter period of uncertainty and distress, we get no more detail, but the charge and invitation to trust who we know Christ to be. “Do you still not know me?” We are called to press back into what we know of Jesus, for he is the way, the truth, and the life.

As a kid, I would get nervous standing there in the woods, not seeing my dad or any other sign of where I was out in the middle of the woods. But I trusted he would not forget me, though I worried a little he would forget where he left me, so I would sometimes move slowly in his direction even when he hadn't waved me on, though not fast enough for it to be obvious that I had not waited for the hand signal.

In a post-Easter reality, the disciples' first response was to lock themselves in a room out of fear. But Jesus commissions them not just to hunker down while he is away, but to continue the works they had seen him do. He says that they will do even greater works than these. "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." As if Jesus is saying, "here is the homework, I hope you didn't daydream through the lesson. No more detail will be given, have I not been with you long enough to know me."

Like students infused with a burst of anxiety, they start searching their memory banks for what they remember, what they know. What works did we see him do? Maybe they hadn't thought of it all that way before. Now they had to reread, sort of speak, looking for what he is referring to, the works they had seen him do. Certainly healing the lame was one of his works, and giving sight to a blind man, and when he told the paralytic to lift up his mat and walk. And the leper who he touched and then healed. And the woman caught in adultery that he sent on in peace and dignity, and being willing to eat in Zacchaeus' house and to forgive him, these were works. And the change he brought to the woman at the well, how she went joy and boldness, that was a work too.

"Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

We go through transitions. Patterns and rhythms and experiences and relationships, they come to an end or change in significant ways. And it would be easy to panic or be filled with fear or dwell in sadness. And it is easy to be overwhelmed. But we are reminded of Christ's continued presence with us, Christ's promise to never abandon us, even if we don't see him for a moment. Christ never abandons his good purposes for us, nor the promise of reunion in the house prepared for us. He prepares a place, he has not forgotten.

We are reminded also that we have his work to carry on with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. So, we grieve what is coming to an end, and we look

with courage to what God has still yet to do in us, trusting the ultimate promise that God will not leave us nor forsake us.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup> In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

*Jesus the Way to the Father*

**14** “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup> In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup> And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

<sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? <sup>10</sup> Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup> Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup> Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup> I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.