

Fourth Sunday of Easter - April 21, 2024

John 14:18–24

“I didn’t bring you this far to desert you”

1. In the movie “E.T.” the being from another planet, the Extra Terrestrial, had come to Earth and was very far from home.
 - a. ET befriends a 10-year-old boy, Elliot, and they form a bond.
 - b. Without spoiling too much, there comes a decision point in the story when ET is preparing for the prospect of going back home.
 - c. It’s a touching scene.
 - d. ET has learned to speak simple English to communicate with Elliot.
 - e. ET says to Elliot: “Come”
 - f. Elliot replies, sadly: “Stay”
 - g. Touching their own heart, ET says: “Ouch” which Elliot repeats the word.
 - h. Then ET lifts their index finger tip, which lights up, and puts it to Elliot’s forehead and says, memorably: “I’ll be right here.”
 - i. The scene is dramatic, and the music in the background is really tugging at the audience’s heart strings.
 - j. Elliot, with tears welling up in his eyes, doesn’t say a word, but you can tell he’s processing the promise.
2. On this Fourth Sunday after Easter, it helps us to consider a question which Jesus disciples must have asked themselves: what do we do now that Jesus is gone?
 - a. The passage we read today comes from a very long set of speeches which Jesus makes in the Gospel of John (goes on for 4 chapters)
 - i. The Gospel writer sets these speeches on the night when Jesus would be betrayed and arrested, what we call Maundy Thursday
 - ii. The scene also includes, by the way, Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, as well as the promise of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and the offer of Jesus’ peace to remain with them
 - b. It makes sense, then, that the Gospel writer would have wanted these memories to be carried forward, for the sake of the disciples who knew Jesus and now missed him, and to those of us followers who never had the chance to be with Jesus.
 - i. Consider, of course, that today’s teaching by Jesus may not have hit the mark when Jesus originally shared it, but eventually it would make sense for them.
 - ii. In the time after his death and resurrection, in the time well after he had returned to God, it makes sense for the disciples to look at each other and ask: so what now?
 - iii. And so they may have recalled (or reconstructed) his teaching with the stark line “I shall not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you all... I [am] in you all.”
 - c. I’m not the first one to suggest a link between Jesus and the movie ET (just Google it for some interesting reading), but rather than make this a one-to-one comparison,

what I want to highlight is that ET's words to Elliot for me echo Jesus' response to the disciples

- i. Jesus says: I will be with you. I will be IN you.
 - ii. Perhaps one way to paraphrase what Jesus said would be this: "You and I've made a mark right here (in your heart). You have my teaching. Follow it, to show your love for me and one another. When you do, God makes God's home right here (in your heart)."
 - d. I tread carefully when people comforting those who grieve the death of a loved one say "They're not gone... they live on in our hearts."
 - i. Well, I don't want to minimize someone's grief. It's real, it hurts. Don't tell me they're not really gone.
 - ii. But with time, I think, we recognize how in some way those who impact us do indeed remain in our hearts and continue to influence us.
 - iii. A week doesn't go by when I don't think to myself that I am channeling my father or my mother when I do something.
 1. And I don't mean it like a genetic inevitability.
 2. I mean it like a choice, like I act compassionately BECAUSE they did.
 - e. If we affirm that Jesus is "right here" in us (in our hearts) then we have to decide what that means in terms of how Jesus continues to influence us as if he were right here right now, teaching us
 - i. It is about carrying on his legacy, which as you know, was one which focused on courageous love, unbounded forgiveness, constant prayer, daring work of justice, and so much more.
3. As we have baptized and confirmed a remarkable group of young people today, I would want us to ask ourselves: How are we "right here" for each other?
 - a. The community of faith promises to be open to the impact God and we each have in one another's hearts, in our actions, in our beliefs.
 - b. To celebrate with these wonderful people is to be committed to ongoing relationship
 - c. We pledge to learn from them and with them, to participate in their spiritual journey, and to invest in their growth as leaders.
 - d. You did that just now.
 - e. But more than that, we are called to pledge that kind of intense involvement with EVERYONE, not just those who officially are on the rolls of a congregation.
 - f. Being "right here" for each other is about how Jesus sought to build community, a community of people called by God.
 - g. Jesus hasn't brought us this far just to desert us.
 - i. To proclaim that we follow a risen Christ means that his influence and guidance continues, and his presence is "right here"
 - ii. And to believe that means that your presence and my presence is part of how the presence of Jesus "right here" is real and empowering.
4. Baptism and confirmation are emotional and spiritual rites of passage when we get to affirm the real presence of Christ in our hearts, and we get to embody that presence in each other's lives, learning together, growing together, investing in one another for the sake of the realm of God.

Reflection questions

1. Think of a time in your life when you felt impacted by the lasting influence of a loved one well after they were no longer part of your life (whether by death or by absence).
2. Put yourself in the place of the disciples hearing Jesus' words in John 14:18–24. What does it mean to you that Jesus is telling YOU: "I shall not leave you orphaned" ?
3. How might God use YOU to embody that promise for someone, so they know they've not been left orphaned by Jesus?