

Transitions: Saying Good-Bye
Matthew 28:16-20
2 Corinthians 13:5-8, 11-14
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Just a minute. I have a call to make.

"Thank you for calling the prayer line in heaven.
 For English, press 1. For Spanish, press 2. For all other languages, press 3.
 Please select one of the following options:
 Press 1 for a request. Press 2 for thanksgiving. Press 3 for complaints. Press 4 for all other prayers.
 I am sorry, all our angels and saints are busy handling other sinners right now. However, your prayer is important to us, and we will answer it in the order it was received. Please stay on the line.
 If you would like to speak to:
 God, press 1.
 Jesus, press 2.
 The Holy Spirit, press 3.
 To find a loved one that has been assigned to heaven, press 4, then enter his or her social security number, followed by the pound sign.
 If you receive a negative response, please hang up and dial area code 666.
 For reservations to heaven, please enter "John" followed by the numbers "3:16."
 For answers to nagging questions about dinosaurs, life on other planets, or why bad things happen to good people, please wait until you arrive in heaven for the specifics.
 Our computers show that you have already been prayed for today. Please hang up and call again tomorrow. The office is now closed for the Sabbath. If you are calling after hours and need emergency assistance, please contact your local pastor.
 Oh, and you're going to have a new pastor July 1. He's not a woman, but he's a good chap.
 Thank you, and have a heavenly day.
 To say good-bye, press 5."

We are here today to say good-bye.

Winnie the Pooh says to Christopher Robin: "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying good-bye so hard." That's how I feel. How lucky—how blessed—I am to have something—this church—that makes saying good-bye so hard.

We have many examples of leave-takings in literature (like *Winnie the Pooh*), in the bible, and, of course, in our lives.

David and Jonathan, in the bible in 1 Samuel, were best friends. When they had to say good-bye, they talked about God's love that had knit them together. One author describes their relationship as a braid of three parts: David, God, and Jonathan. God was the middle part of the braid that bound them together. Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace! The two of us have vowed friendship in God's name, saying, 'God will be the bond between me and you, and between my children and your children forever!'" (1 Sam. 20:42 in *The Message*). When God brings people together, the connection lasts, and people continue to love one another, even when they have parted. They continue to care and wish one another well. We know this in our families—no matter where our loved ones are, we love them. And an old friend, even far away, is always a friend.

The Gospel writers wrote many versions of how Jesus said good-bye. We have been reading the stories of Jesus' last days. We read about his appearing to two friends on the Road to Emmaus in Luke, then how he ate with them before disappearing. We read about his ascending into heaven in Acts. We read about his appearing to Thomas in John. And last week, we read about how the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost, to take the place of Jesus. Many pages of the bible are devoted, one way or another, to Jesus saying good-bye.

He says in John that he will not leave the people orphaned. And in today's reading in Matthew, just before he leaves, he gives the people a challenge: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:19-20a). That's a pretty tall order: Go? (out of our comfort zone?) Make disciples of *all* nations? (Talk to everybody?) Obey *everything* Jesus commanded us? (Even love your enemy?) Jesus wants his teachings to continue in us. And he says that, although he leaves us, God does not.

In fact, God stays in more than one way. This passage and the one from 2 Corinthians are the two that mention the Trinity in the bible. Scholars say the doctrine of the Trinity came much later than this writing, but these passages support the idea that God has many forms: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three of them. One way to think of this triune God, is to recognize that God is beyond us—in God the Father; God is with us—in the person of Jesus; and God is within us—in the essence of the Holy Spirit (Carl Gregg in <https://onemansweb.org/matthew-trinity-and-me-which-song-shall-i-sing-matthew-2816-20.html>). God is beyond us—unknown and yet a powerful transcendent presence. God is with us—and we can converse with God as the disciples did with Jesus. And God is within us—that spark of the holy that we can feel in moments of emotional depth. This wide range of understanding of God is what Jesus promises as he says good-bye.

A poet and minister by the name of Steve Garnass-Holmes says, in addition to the three persons, "You are the fourth person of the Holy Trinity. Find yourself there."

So I ask you to do that today. In the leave-taking of my moving into retirement, find yourself as the fourth person of the Holy Trinity. Find yourself in God who is beyond, with, and within you.

It says, in Matthew, that as Jesus left, "some doubted." And I believe they would have doubted that Jesus could reappear like that after death. Eugene Boring, a progressive biblical scholar, says, "Faith in the resurrection is a matter of worship, not of analysis and inference. Even so, it does not exclude doubt, but takes doubt into itself" (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII, 505). We all have doubt; it's part of being thinking human beings.

A lot has happened in the six years I have had the honor to serve here as your minister. One thing that happened is that we crafted a vision statement together, "Dare to question, love, and serve." We could also include in that, "Dare to doubt." We will never be sure of who God is and whether Jesus was truly divine as well as human. But we can dare to believe midst our doubt, and midst our questions. And exactly what we believe will vary from one person to the next.

I would like to hope that we believe in something greater than ourselves that is truly needed in this world; call it hope, call it love, call it God.

During these six years, much has happened around the globe: In 2011 there was a revolution in Egypt that suggested an Arab Spring might bring freedom and hope to the people of the Middle East. There was a tsunami in Japan that caused the Fukushima Nuclear Plant meltdown and over 15,000 deaths. Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan by U.S. Navy SEALs. At a school in Newtown, CT in 2012, a gunman shot 27 children and teachers, and militants attacked and killed the U.S. Ambassador in Benghazi, Libya. In 2013 the world received a new pope, named after St. Francis, the one who gave up his riches to become poor. Also in 2013 we grieved over the Boston Marathon bombings. In 2014 we watched how Russia annexed Crimea, and the Islamic State seized Mosul in Iraq. The Ebola virus epidemic broke out in West Africa. In 2015 The Episcopal Church permitted gay marriage. In that year, the population of India reached 1 billion. A crisis mushroomed between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, and another between Russia and Ukraine. And then in 2016 the UK voted to leave the European Union, and Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. And now in 2017 President Trump has issued executive orders restricting travel and immigration from Muslim countries, and just recently he has withdrawn our nation from signing the Paris Climate Accord. It's a list of turmoil, mostly dark tragedies, with only a few glimmers of light.

Where is God in all this? Perhaps that is our challenge: to assert the love of God in our world, to stand up for goodness and equality and diversity. Even when we doubt, to move forward in faith that there is always something to strive for, and that life is good and that we are never alone.

God is an anchor—it's a good metaphor because an anchor gives stability and yet also some freedom. Anchored by God's love, we are asked to carry out the teachings of Jesus—to love God and our neighbor, to seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

A minister named Bruce Epperly has written a book, *The Gospel According to Winnie the Pooh*. In it, Epperly compares the meandering tales of Pooh Bear to be like the Gospel

stories of Jesus. Pooh, who is a bear with a small brain, has an abundant heart, and he walks along a peaceful path. Much healing happens around him: life is imperfect, but somehow joyful. Pooh and his friends discover the grace of interdependence, acceptance, and self-discovery. The author has an imaginary conversation with Pooh and Christopher Robin:

The writer says: "We may forget, but God doesn't. Everything lives on within God's memory."

"I like being remembered," Pooh averred.

"But is that all there is to it?" Christopher Robin asked.

"I think there's something more," said the writer. "There's something everlasting about a bear and a boy in the 100 Aker Wood. The love they had and the adventures they shared will not perish. The feelings go on, the relationships continue, and the love we feel right now never ends. I can't say a lot about what's next, but I believe that we continue to grow. We become even more ourselves than we are today. We grow in stature and love....We have new adventures in God's companionship. I can't say more except that God never loses anyone. God's love outlasts any barriers or any guilt we have" (102-103).

Winnie the Pooh concludes: "Life is a journey to be experienced." He knows that parts of the journey will come to an end, and so he says to his friend Piglet: "If there ever comes a day when we can't be together, keep me in your heart. I'll stay there forever."

In the last chapter of *Winnie the Pooh*, in which Pooh and Christopher Robin go to the enchanted part of the forest, they come to the point when they have to say goodbye.

Pooh says, "Goodbye? Oh no, please. Can't we just go back to page one and start all over again?"

"Sorry, Pooh, but all stories have an ending, you know."

"Oh, bother," says Pooh.

And so I end, as Paul ends his letter to the people of Corinth:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor. 13:13). Amen.