

Ascension Sunday  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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For the church, Easter isn't just one Sunday. It's seven weeks of stories about Jesus showing up and speaking to his friends after the Resurrection. You may remember that Lent is 40 days long. And so the church, which can sometimes be a little heavy-handed in its symbolism, wants us to be certain that life always triumphs over death, and so the season of Easter is longer than the season of Lent by ten days. Lent is 40; Easter is 50.

In these fifty days, Jesus gets a lot done. He appears over and over to his friends and disciples, embodying God's triumph of life over death. Some of the visits are pretty famous. Jesus sees his friends on the road to Emmaus, and they recognize him only when he breaks bread with them. He also sees them after a long night of fishing, sitting on the shore cooking some fish just like they did in the old days. Famously, he appears in a locked room, where Thomas wants to see the wounds in his side to prove that it really is Jesus who died on the cross.

In all of these post-resurrection visits, you get a sense that Jesus has some urgency to his mission. He says over and over that he knows he is returning to God the Father, and Jesus wants to prepare his friends for taking over the work of healing, casting out demons, and forgiving sins. He needs to get the disciples ready for prime time before he ascends to heaven.

And so, in today's readings, he gets one last stab at getting the disciples, at getting us, ready to be the church on earth. This is Jesus' last chance to address his disciples before he leaves the earth for the last time. My eldest niece graduated from college last week, and I tuned into the live stream of the ceremony. I listened to the commencement speakers, and, I will tell you, graduation outfits and graduation speeches haven't changed at all in the last twenty-five years. The students all look eager to go into the world, and the professors all look proud but tired. The speeches all say some version of: Remember this moment. Remember the lessons of this great institution. Do your best. Change the world.

I think there was a time when I thought that these valedictory addresses were kind of cheesy and maybe even a little played out—after all, they say the same thing year after year. But, in my current middle age, I'm starting to think that the reason these graduation addresses all sound the same is because there are some things that need to be said repeatedly because they are so important.

I'm starting to think that, even though Jesus is repeating himself in this Easter season, he is doing it because these are the words that the church needs to hear—not just at the time of the disciples, but in our time, right now.

We're baptizing little Isabelle Lynn this morning into the family of Christ, as the newest member of God's church on earth. And Jesus' words to his disciples before he leaves the earth are just as important for Isabelle to hear as they were for the disciples, as they are for us.

Go into the world and be a force for healing. Go into the world and be a force for justice. Go into the world and tell the stories of God's salvation. Go into the world and give succor to the poor and hold the corrupt to account. That is the mission of the church, and it's this message that Jesus is trying to get across before he goes.

But, of course, we in the church have short memories. We are like those new graduates who probably won't appreciate the wisdom of our professors until we're older. We're sitting here, in our robes and our mortarboard hats, impatient to leave campus for the last time, while the speaker is trying desperately to get us to listen to a few last words of wisdom. That's exactly what Jesus is doing with his disciples today. And, it's what we hope to do with Isabelle and her parents today. There will be times in Isabelle's life when she does not remember the promises that her parents and godparents are making on her behalf this morning. There will be times when she will need to say that she is sorry and to ask forgiveness from those around her. And there will be times when she really knocks it out of the park and does amazing things. And, what we promise as a church today, is that on the good days, we will love and support her. And on the bad days, we will love and support her.

And, what Jesus is saying to us today, is that the power to be the church on this earth is not confined to just Jesus, not to just the disciples—but instead, this power of the church on earth is given to all of us, and especially at our baptisms. Our baptism is our graduation into the life of the church, and it has been that way for two thousand years.

Welcome to the church, Isabelle. We give to you the mighty gift of the church that Jesus first gave to us. And, actually, if we play our cards right, we'll be giving you a new nursery in a year or so, just in time for you to run around in with all your friends. Amen.