

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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April 24, 2016  
*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter*  
John 13:31-35

### **When New Really Is Better**

Each year the season of Easter extends for seven weeks after Easter Sunday itself. There are at least a couple of reasons for that. For one, from a calendar perspective and the annual cycle of the church, Easter lasts for 50 days—from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, Pentecost being that day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit that filled the followers of Jesus with all the power and oomph they needed to get things moving with the Christian church.

Another reason to extend Easter, of course, is that the amazing good news of Jesus' resurrection on Easter is just too big, too good, too remarkable to limit it to a single day.

The truth be told though—we simply cannot pretend that the resurrection didn't happen. We can't forget it. We can't obscure it. The truth of the resurrection is so monumental that it changed everything for God's people. In fact the day of worship changed from the last day of the week—Saturday—to the first day of the week—Sunday. Beginning with that first Easter Sunday, every Sunday since is an Easter celebration of God's amazing resurrection of Jesus. Every Sunday is Easter Sunday. The old ways are over and done. Everything has become new.

So transformative is the Easter event that we look at everything through its lens. And that includes the Bible itself—both the Old Testament texts of the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament scriptures. As Christians, every time we read the Bible, we're reading it with Easter eyes. Even on the one day of the year that we commemorate Jesus' death by crucifixion on the cross, when we try our hardest to put ourselves in the place of the eyewitnesses, we still call that day good—Good Friday. We simply cannot not know that Easter Sunday is coming.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are written in a narrative fashion though, each telling the story of Jesus. They tell his story in chronological order. So when we start with the birth narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we read about Jesus as an infant—long before the events portrayed in the remainder of the gospels. When we read in Luke about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem in a stable, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are the furthest things from our minds.

However, each of the 4 gospel writers was committing to writing the story of Jesus long after the events described actually took place. In other words, as they began writing, in what we would say is the first verse of the first chapter, they already knew what was going to be written in the last verse of the last chapter. The gospel writers were not news reporters who were chronicling the life of Jesus as he lived it out in real time. As they wrote about the beginning of Jesus' ministry, they already knew what happens at the end of Jesus' ministry.

Perhaps a good way to make this point in our contemporary situation is to look at the current drama of the 2016 U.S. Presidential race that is currently underway in our nation. As much as some prognosticators would like to make you think that they know who will get the major party nominations and ultimately who will be elected our next President, we all know that that is merely hope and speculation at this juncture. No one yet knows what the outcome of the election will be in November. All of the chronicling that is being written now is simply reporting and summarizing what is happening as it happens. Now, to be sure, there will a lot of books and articles written, beginning November 9—the day after Election Day—analyzing and drawing conclusions about the election of President

Fill-In-The-Blank. And all that analysis and study will have an impact and on how the story is written from there on out. For as it's written it will be so, leading up to the known eventuality of the election of President Fill-In-The-Blank.

Knowing how the story ends affects every aspect of how the story unfolds and leads up to that ending. That's why new history books are being written and published all the time about historical events that have been written about many times before. Think, for example, of the large number of books about the U.S. Civil War that will be found on a library shelf. No single one of them tells the full story. And by the way, every one of those books was written with the full knowledge that the Civil War ended with the United States of America intact.

Which brings us to our text for today and why we're reading it in this extended season of Easter. This paragraph in which Jesus shares with his disciples his new commandment that you love one another is contained in a much longer part of John's gospel that is at the end of Jesus' ministry. It's right after Jesus washes his disciples' feet. And it's right before Jesus predicts that Peter will deny Jesus when the going gets rough.

This little paragraph is one small part of what has been called Jesus' farewell discourse before he is betrayed, and led off to what will be his death on the cross.

On the surface of it where we read the story chronologically as it unfolds we really shouldn't be reading it 5 weeks after Easter Sunday. It would be much more appropriate and timely for us to be reading several weeks before Easter in the Lenten season of penitence and reflection. For if Jesus said these words before he died, isn't that the context in which we would best understand what Jesus is telling his disciples?

Well, yes and no. Or maybe even a little yes and a lot no.

For let's remember that when this paragraph was written—the spoken word being committed to the written word—it was long after Jesus was off the scene. But even the spoken word was being recited by storytellers who knew the rest of the story. When we begin to look at the gospels in this way we begin to understand that every word of it is written in the light of the resurrection of Jesus. All of it becomes appropriate and relevant to us as we glean its meaning and truth on this side of the empty cross.

Jesus said, "Little children I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you 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." (Jn. 13:33-35)

These words of Jesus were profound and powerful for those first disciples and they are profound and powerful for us as disciples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For the first disciples who were picking up where Jesus left off, this new commandment to love one another became central to the public witness made by the disciples throughout the rest of their lives. No longer was the physical presence of Jesus central to the witness of God's new way. In place of Jesus' physical presence was the band of Jesus' disciples who before Jesus' death and resurrection were followers in the footsteps of Jesus, and who after the death and resurrection of Jesus are now a band of leaders confident in their message of God's loving grace being offered to the whole world.

Central to that proclamation was this powerful demonstration of a new way to be in community with one another—loving one another as Jesus had loved them before.

This new more excellent way of love permeates everything else that follows in the pages of the New Testament. All of it bears witness to the amazing loving grace of God. Everything is new in the light of this good news of Easter life.

And on this particular day when we lift up for special mention and focus this newness to which we are called, how spectacular that we include some of the wondrous and glorious heavenly vision that we find in the book of Revelation. This final book of the Bible is an amazing book that provides hope for God's people across the ages to this very day.

"Then I saw a **new** heaven and a **new** earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the **new** Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them as their God;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things **new**.' And also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'" (Rev. 21:1-6)

As Jesus gave the disciples a new commandment, so God in the heavenly vision in Revelation provides newness: a new heaven; new earth; new Jerusalem; making all things new.

Our calling in our day is to make this newness known to the world today. Just as the disciples were called to publically demonstrate their discipleship through their mutual love, so we are to demonstrate our discipleship through our mutual love.

When the world looks at us and says, "See how they love one another," then we'll know that we've living the new (and better) way to which Jesus calls us.