In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the day that he shall depart from them. He is preparing them for continuing in what they have received from him, but continuing in a new way. For three years they have followed him, walked beside him. For three years they have seen him at work, and at rest. For three years he told them new stories and parables, and interpreted for them stories from the Law and the prophets that they had been told from the time that they were little children. But all of this was going to change. No longer would they see his face. No longer would they walk beside him. No longer would they hear him tell stories, or teach them about the stories from the Scriptures. They were about to be confronted with the distressing reality of their Lord’s physical departure from them.

We too, this day and every day, are confronted with the reality of Christ’s physical absence. Every generation of the Church has been forced to reckon with this reality. Every time that we are gathered together by the Holy Spirit, we come together in order to hear about this one who walked about Israel two thousand years ago, telling people to follow him. The fundamental call of the Gospel is to come to Jesus, repent of your sins, turn to him, and follow. But, how shall the disciples now follow one they cannot see? How shall we turn to one that we have never seen? When Jesus came to his disciples and told them to follow, there was no ambiguity about what this might mean: they had living flesh and blood right in front of them. When he took a step, their job was to take note and do the same. If he stopped somewhere for the night, they were to stay with him.

For each of us here this morning we too have heard the call of Jesus. We have heard his word read and preached, and we have all responded to his call. I know this because you are all here this morning, and not just because this is a sunny Sunday morning in Memorial Day weekend. We have all heard Jesus’ call to come to him, to repent of our sins and follow him wherever he should lead. And we are all here because that is our desire. But where is he that we might
follow? Without his physical presence, how shall we know where to go or what to do?

Our reading comes from what is called our Lord's Farewell Discourse. This Farewell Discourse is five chapters long, and the whole purpose of it is to prepare the Church for Christ’s physical departure. The focus is often on how Jesus is preparing the disciples for his betrayal and crucifixion, which will begin that night. Jesus is not only preparing them for the three days that he will be in the tomb, but also for the whole history of the Church from the time of the ascension to what we see in our reading from Revelation, when Christ and his church behold one another face to face. Jesus takes so much time with this, five long chapters, because it is so vitally important. For nearly two thousand years, the whole church has had to depend on Jesus’ teaching here for understanding the situation that we have found ourselves in. That situation is the difficult task of living not by sight, but by faith, not in full possession, but in hope—hope in that which we do not yet see.

In our reading from the Gospel this morning, there are four promises that Jesus makes. Without these four things taking place in the Church, the Church would simply not be able to exist, there would not have been a community on earth that continued to live on in this world participating in Christ’s Resurrection. With these promises given to us, the Church can confidently and hopefully endure all that happens in this world.

The first thing that he promises is that the Father will send the Paraclete. Jesus says, “the Paraclete, [is] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name” (John 14:26 NJB). Perhaps you are unfamiliar with this word, Paraclete, that’s okay, it’s a Greek word. It is one of those words that simply evades translation. It doesn’t escape translation because nobody knows what it means, or because there aren’t English words that are like it. It is because it is a word that combines so many different ideas at once. If you know this verse already, you might know one of the different ways that it is translated: such as Comforter, from the King James translation, or Helper, or Counselor, but it also sometimes translated as Advocate or Consoler,¹ or simply Friend. All of these ideas which have slightly different shades of meaning in English all combine together in this one beautiful word: Paraclete.

The Father will send the Paraclete, in Jesus’ name. In Jesus’ physical absence, the Spirit of Christ will comfort them in their sorrows, will be a present help in time of trouble, will console them in their suffering. The Church, throughout the ages, has endured much suffering and hardship. This past century has seen more martyrs than any other century in Christian history. In fact Jesus has promised that the Church and each of its members will endure suffering for the sake of the Gospel. As Jesus was hated by the world, so too will the Church be hated by the world. In Matthew 24, Jesus tells his disciples, “they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake” (24:9). Jesus tells us here, that in the midst of trials and temptations, in the midst of suffering and even in death, we shall not be without a Paraclete, a Comforter and a Helper and a friend, one who will give us strength and power to withstand all the difficulties of living in Christ and dying in Christ in the midst of this world.

The second promise that Jesus gives is that this same Paraclete will also be the great Teacher of the Church. As Jesus says, he will “teach [the disciples] all things, and bring to [their] remembrance all that [Jesus] said to [them]” (John 14:26 RSV). When Jesus would teach, the disciples were usually just as in the dark as the crowds were. How often did the disciples come to Jesus after he taught on a hillside or stood on a boat, and ask him, so Jesus, Teacher, what did that parable mean? Rabbi, did you really mean what you said about eating your flesh? The difference between the disciples and the crowds was not that the disciples were smarter or had more insight. This is good news for us, I think. The difference was that they came to Jesus with their questions, and they came believing that what he said was true. So then, how distressing it must have been for them to hear that they would no longer be able to come to him after his public lectures and sermons. So he promises them that he will see to it that they do not forget what he taught them, he will see to it that they still have a teacher.

And so it is that the Spirit oversaw the Church’s memory of Jesus. And we have received this same memory, because the Spirit also oversaw the writing and the handing on of Holy Scripture. Jesus has promised us that the words of Holy Scripture are not to be distrusted because of the human processes by which they were written and handed on, neither are they to be distrusted because of the cultural or political or social milieu from which they came. Holy Scripture is reliable and trustworthy because Christ’s own Spirit brought him to remembrance. This promise is fulfilled in our midst in all sorts of ways. When
the Word of God is read in Church, or faithfully taught and preached, this is nothing other than the work of the Holy Spirit, leading the Church into all truth, bringing us to remember Jesus. When you are tempted to do something that you know would not please the Lord, but you are reminded of something that the Bible says, this is the Spirit of God bringing Jesus’ words to your remembrance.

The work of the Spirit in the Church is always to bring to remembrance all that Jesus has done and said, and precisely thereby to comfort and guide and console the Church. For it is Christ’s words that the Church lives on. So the first and second promises are that Jesus will give his own Spirit who will comfort and guide and console, but also teach the Church.

In the third promise, Jesus tells the disciples that he leaves his peace with us: “peace I leave with you,” Jesus says, “my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Set your hearts at rest, and banish your fears” (John 14:27 RSV, LBW). This is not merely external peace, this is not peace as opposed to war. This peace can exist at the same time as war. This peace transcends understanding. The world simply cannot give this peace. In this peace all things are at rest—the final and eternal Sabbath of creation and God. This is the peace that all of creation groans for, the peace that each of us are always yearning for, whether we know it or not, in which we are exactly who we were made to be in the midst of a creation that is exactly as it was made to be, where all things are visibly reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. This is the eternal peace in which even the very opposition between night and day is gone, between light and darkness. As our reading from Revelation showed, the light of the glory of God will permeate and enlighten all things, and night will be no more. This is what Jesus gives to us even now, where the final end where all things are at peace starts to work its way into every area of our lives, every relationship, every thought, every emotions, every corner of our mind and body, and every conversation. This is indeed peace that surpasses understanding.

So Jesus gives three great promises. He gives us a Paraclete who will comfort and guide, but who will also be our Teacher, and Jesus gives us true peace. If we are not careful, however, we might be tempted to think that these three promises are given in order to make up for Jesus leaving them—a sort of consolation prize. We might be tempted to think that the disciples should be glad that Jesus is going to his Father, like a colleague who gets a new position and so is transferring to a floor with a better office. But Jesus is the eternal Son of the
Father. The Father was always in the Son, the Son was always in the Father, even when he came to earth. The Son did not break off fellowship with his Father when he became human.

So it is not for his own sake that he goes to be with the Father. For in truth, he never left the Father. It is for our sake that he goes. Everything that Jesus ever did was for our sake, because of his love for us. So too is his departure to be with the Father for our sake, for us and for our salvation. But how can his leaving us be for us?

This is because Jesus is not sending his Spirit as a sort of replacement for himself. Neither the Spirit that he sends nor the peace that he gives can replace Jesus, or hold his place until he returns. When Jesus gives the Church his Spirit, he is giving the same Spirit that has eternally been the bond of love and fellowship between God the Father and his Son. The Spirit is the love that exists between the Father and the Son. The Spirit unites the Father and the Son in love and communion and fellowship.

This same Spirit, this same bond of love, is who the Father and the Son give to us, to the Church. This same Spirit is the one who is poured out on the Church at Pentecost. When the Church receives this Spirit, we are not receiving someone in the place of Jesus or his Father. When we receive the Holy Spirit, it is Jesus himself and his Father who are coming to us. This is the fourth and great promise of this Gospel lesson. Indeed, this is the great promise of the Gospel.

As Jesus said at the beginning of our reading, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23 RSV). Jesus and his Father will come and make their home with the one who loves Jesus. How shall this be? Precisely in the same way that they have made their home with one another from all of eternity. The Father and the Son come to make their home with us and in us by giving the Spirit of their love, by sending the love that they have for one another into our hearts, by giving their own Spirit who from eternity has united the two in fellowship and communion and peace.

So when the Son says that he gives us his own peace, that is another way of saying that he is giving us his own Spirit. When Jesus says that he gives us his Spirit, he is saying that he gives us the Spirit of his presence, the Spirit of his love for his Father. What the Father gives to the Son, the Son and the Father now give to us. The Spirit unites the Church on earth with Jesus and his Father in
heaven, so that in the Church heaven and earth are not infinitely far apart, but are as close as the Father is to his Son. This is the great promise of our Gospel lesson. Indeed this is the great promise of salvation, this is what Easter resurrection has accomplished. The great promise of the Gospel is that we are included in the sharing and giving of life and love between the three persons of God.

And only in this way is it indeed good news for us that Jesus goes to the Father. For only in returning to the Father will he send his Spirit, not so that the Spirit will take Jesus’ place with us, but so that the Spirit will always bring Jesus to us and us to him.

We had heard last Sunday in our reading from Revelation that the Church is the Bride of Christ. What bride would rejoice at her beloved sending someone else in his place? What bride would rejoice if he had sent someone only to comfort in the face of his total absence? The bride rejoices in no one but the one that she loves, the bride rejoices only in her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

But, it cannot be denied that there is something yet still incomplete about all of this. The Spirit brings us to the Son and his Father, and the brings the Father and Jesus to us. But the reality of what is set forth in the Book of Revelation has not yet come to pass. We still need the sun for our light, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, has not yet appeared. We ourselves are not yet shining with the glory of the risen Christ. There is still much that is wrong with this world. The nations still need to be healed from the leaves of the Tree of Life. Above all, we ourselves still need to be set to rights, we need to be cleansed and healed, we still need to be made into people of peace.

Between the ascension of Jesus to his Father’s right hand and the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven to earth, we have not been left as orphans, we have not been left without the presence of Jesus. It is not the absence of Jesus that causes us to hope, but the very presence of Jesus in his Church that causes us to hope, to hope for that which we do not yet see, which is the face of Jesus. Now we see through a mirror dimly, now we see through a veil. We do indeed now see, but someday we shall see clearly—not through a mirror, not through a veil—we shall see and know even as we are now seen and known by the risen Christ. And so the Church always prays, and we pray now, come Lord Jesus. Come, take away the mirror. Come show us your face. Come, set this world to rights, heal the nations. Come, ease our strife and our wars. Come, make the peace
that you have shed abroad in our hearts be visible in this world. Come, set our own hearts and the wars within us at peace, and heal us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.