

May 1, Sixth Sunday of Easter: John 14:23-29

by [Emlyn A. Ott](#) in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue

One of the great gifts of public ministry is spending time with congregations in transition. When a community of faith ponders a change—in leadership, in identity, in the configuration of relationships with other communities—there is a need for constant attention to the experience of loss and to how this intersects with making good on our baptismal and community covenants.

I recently spent several days with members of a congregation as they prepared for the retirement of a long-serving and well-loved leader. The gathered community was involved in anticipatory grief. We spent hours together mining the history of the ministry and sharing stories of the era spent with this leader.

Several people said to me, “This place will never be the same.” To which I replied, “You are right.” Others added, “Well, it is time for a change.” How could they be the place that they needed to be without this leader there with them?

I asked questions to prompt and challenge the group to remember past experiences and what they brought to the table. I asked them not just to remember their engagements in ministry but also to dig deeply into what was beneath those engagements. Could they carry their experiences of love, challenge, and hope into the next era of their ministry?

It’s common to confuse our ministry leaders with Jesus. Jesus’ words in this week’s Gospel passage are set up in the previous verse by a question from Judas: “How is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” Why do we have to carry the message? We can see ourselves in Judas’s question, as we can in the disciples’ lunkheadedness throughout the Gospels.

The early followers of Jesus may have allowed their myopic view of their relationship with him to shortchange his gifts of peace, persistence, power, and love—gifts he left with them to sustain them in their lives that followed. You do not have to have someone with you in the flesh to carry on what you have shared together. What you have experienced is unique, and that uniqueness is an invitation into the future. There is a richness of presence in the reality of absence.

A wise colleague and mentor once said to me, in response to a comment I made about a disappointing experience, "Expectations are a down payment on bitterness." The expression startled me, stopped me dead in my tracks of self-righteous arrogance. What? My expectations are not the result of hope? And they might lead instead to my missing the point?

Judas's question stops us in our tracks, too. How do we live in its aftermath? Jesus expects something of us as we look ahead. Why us? Why not the rest of the world? We need some help here.

It's hard to hear Jesus' words that follow and not imagine what the future will bring. Matthew, Mark, and Luke give ringing answers about an imminent, universally evident return of Jesus. Here in John, the revelation will come not at a certain day or hour but in being "at home" with Jesus, the Father, and the Advocate. All that tension and apocalyptic anticipation gets nestled in the interior life of loving Jesus and keeping his word.

Like the early church, we can't expect that each year's Easter celebration means that all will be made well right now. We are in it for the long haul. But what do we expect in the days, weeks, and months that follow that great revelation that Christ is risen? It is awe-inspiring and terrifying, this standing vulnerably before the great mysteries of life without imminent resolution.

As the jubilant alleluias of Easter fade, we return to our daily routines and concerns, replete with old baggage packed by time and a mixture of hurt, hope, giftedness, and repetition. All of those alleluias don't take away the sting of lost jobs, the challenge of putting food on the table, the difficulty of ensuring people's equality and their safety from violence and hate. The fading alleluias remind us of this Jesus who remains present, dwelling in the community of believers even in the midst of absence.

Every community of believing people is troubled by worry about the future. It is part of the human condition. These transition points may serve as crises of faith that allow us the opportunity to emphasize ever more strongly the imperative of love: for God, for one another, and for our neighbors. We work and weep and wait, not knowing what will be in store for us. We struggle when our expectations go unmet. But in the meantime, can any other command provide a better focus for our lives?