



Easter 6
May 10, 2026
John 14:15-21

Not as Orphans

“Not as orphans are we left in sorrow now.” Orphan is a strong word. Since the rise of the foster care system, the word orphan has gone a bit by the wayside. We likely talk more about foster kids or foster homes than we do orphans and orphanages, even though they are related. At least in my mind, the word orphan paints a little bit more of a bleak, dire situation. A foster kid can still have living parents. An orphan does not. A foster home may provide a loving environment where you can picture a kid having a bedroom with colorful bedspreads and toys in the closet. An orphanage paints a picture of a massive, sterile room, with metal-framed beds or cribs lined up one after another. Foster parents can be depicted as warm and loving. Orphanage workers, at least in the movies, can be depicted as cruel and cold. Why did Jesus use this word in our lesson today? I will not leave you as orphans. And how does that apply to us. “I will not leave you as orphans.”

There are actually a few people in our congregation who fit the dictionary definition of orphan. They lost their parents at a young age, or they don't know who their parents are. That's not what Jesus is talking about here. In John 15, he's talking to eleven grown men and he wasn't their dad. Of course, he wasn't going to leave them as literal orphans. But why did they need to hear this promise now? Jesus had just spent three years with these men. He was their teacher, explaining Scriptural truths to them. At times, he provided for their physical needs – saving them from storms on the sea or miraculously providing food for them. He was their friend and their companion. He served them. He loved them. In fact, just an hour earlier, he got down on his hands and knees, washed their feet and said, as I have loved you, love one another. You just look at that list, Jesus was acting as a parent – providing, protecting, watching, teaching, loving, etc. But now he just told them, I'm going and you can't come with me. At least not yet.

And you can imagine where the disciples' minds went? You're leaving us? What are we going to do? Is it something about us? Why are you abandoning us? We don't want to be left alone. What's our identity going to be? We're Jesus and his disciples. You can't have Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers without Tom Petty. Or Huey Lewis and the News without Huey Lewis. Or Gladys Night and the Pips without Gladys Night. For the last three years, their identity was tied to Jesus. And now he was leaving? Fear. Hopelessness. Despair. Confusion. So many emotions must have been pouring in, perhaps similar to what orphans feel. Lack of identity. Confusion. Despair. Fear. Hurt. Abandonment. On this Mother's Day weekend, I think of how often an orphan must want to cry out, “Mommy,” but there's no Mommy. For the disciples, they can't imagine crying out, “Jesus,” but there's no Jesus. And that's the tension in our lives, isn't it? When suffering settles in, when loneliness grows loud, when guilt convinces us we are unworthy of love, we begin to wonder, ‘Are you still there? Do you still care? Am I still your child?’ If any of those thoughts or similar ones have crept into your minds, hear Jesus' promise, “I will not leave you as orphans.”

Why could he say that to his disciples? He knew what was going to happen. Yes, that night he would leave them. More accurately they would leave him. Out of fear, they would soon run into the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane. The next day, not only would he be abandoned by his friends, he'd be abandoned by his Father, as he hung on the cross. But he knew Sunday was coming. And so he could say, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” And that same living Savior, says the same to us. Read the Scriptures. How many times doesn't Jesus remind us of his presence? The very thing that he instituted just before saying this promise is what we get to celebrate today. We call it the teaching of the real presence. This isn't just Jesus symbolically coming to us in the sacrament of communion. Rather, he says, “This is my body. This is my blood.” Miraculously, he attaches himself to the bread and wine. We read, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” Next week we'll hear him say his parting words from earth. Before ascending he says, “Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” Or how about the closing words of Scripture, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Again and again and again, Jesus reminds us of his presence. And in so doing, he answers the need of any orphan. He assures us we aren't orphans because his presence assures us that we are loved.

And yet, how often don't we slip into the ways of the world. Jesus tells his disciples, “I will come to you... but the world will not see me anymore.” And I confess, I don't always see Jesus – be it his presence or his love. When bad things happen to my family, I don't always see Jesus' hand. When stress levels are elevated, my eyes aren't. I don't see Jesus. When I look at myself, my sin and my shortcomings, I don't see Jesus. And Jesus knew that. He knew that about his disciples and he knew that about us. So what did he promise? “I will ask my Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of Truth.”

There's lots to unpack in that promise. First of all, that title, “Advocate.” Some translations say, “Counselor.” Some say, “Comforter.” Truth is, they all fit. I don't think there's an English word that conveys all that is encompassed in this title. You maybe have even heard a transliteration of this word as the Greek word used here has actually become an English word: paraclete. I remember teaching this once and a student said, “A pair of cleats?” No, paraclete. Although, pair of cleats works. We have soccer camp coming up quickly. Why do you wear a pair of cleats? To give you good footing on a sloppy or slippery field. That's kind of what the Spirit does. He gives us sure footing as we go through our life. *Calling alongside you.*

As our Advocate, he speaks on our behalf. Our court system actually uses this term for orphans or foster kids. Ever hear of CASA – court appointed special advocates. They represent kids to make sure their needs are met. That’s what the Spirit does. Just like Jesus, he intercedes before the Father on our behalf. Or Counselor, he guides as he opens our eyes to the path that is laid out for us in the Word. He’s a comforter, a helper, an encourager. Or Jesus says here, he’s the “Spirit of truth.” That’s so important when it comes to our relationship with Jesus and his promises. We can hear Jesus’ promises, “I am with you.” We can read, “Because I live you also will live.” But we don’t always feel that way. And the Holy Spirit reminds us that feelings are not facts. You may go through a season of life where you feel like an orphan, but the Spirit of truth says, “You are not orphans.” You may feel forgotten, but the Spirit of Truth says God never forgets you. You may feel that Jesus is gone forever, but the Spirit of Truth reminds you that Jesus is with you. You may feel unloved, but the Spirit of Truth says you are loved.

And here’s what is so cool about this Spirit of Truth, this Advocate. Not only does he teach and remind us of who God is and what he has done for your life. He also changes the way we live for God. Look at the bookends of this section. “If you love me, keep my commands.” And, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.” Is there any part of those verses that scare you? They scared me. *“If you love me, keep my commands.”* I don’t always keep God’s commands. Do I really love him? And if I don’t love him, does that mean I won’t be loved by God? Ripped out of context, those verses are extremely scary!

But let the bookends be the bookends. Bookends hold what’s between them. And what’s between these verses. The Spirit of Truth who “lives with you and will be in you.” By myself, I cannot love God. But I’m not by myself. And neither are you. As lost and condemned creatures by nature, we could not do a thing to please our holy God. But the Spirit has come into your heart, whether it was through the Word connected to the waters of baptism or simply through the Word itself. Right now, the Spirit is with you and in you. He has shown you a Savior who died for you, who lives for you, and who loves you. And in so doing, he has equipped you to love him back. We love because he first loved us.

As I studied for this sermon, I came across so many articles about the orphanages in communist Romania. Maybe you remember the reports of over 100,000 orphans in living conditions that were atrocious. When it all came to light in 1990, the world’s outcry was tremendous. Those orphans and the effects of their conditions have been studied for decades now. You can read it for yourself. But a common theme keeps rising to the top. Orphans need to be loved. And orphans have a need to love. The Spirit of Truth makes both of those things possible. May he continue to open eyes to see how you are loved by your Savior. And celebrate how the Spirit has equipped to love God and others. I will not leave you as orphans. That was not just a promise that Jesus made and kept for eleven friends. It’s a promise made and kept for you. He did not leave us as orphans. Rather, celebrate that you are a child of God. Amen.