

Easter 6, Year C

- Jesus has a word for us today: “I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”
- It is strange to be standing here, knowing that things could so easily have been otherwise
- That just a few days ago, a tornado passed about a block from here, and could have easily torn apart this building, thrown this pulpit into another zip code
- It’s strange knowing that we are able to gather here only by the grace of God and the luck of the draw – that this church wasn’t more dramatically affected by the force of that tornado that was able to tear limbs from trees and roofs from houses, and cause so much damage around our city
- It’s strange, but there is beauty to be seen as well
- I am not making light of the suffering or the tragedy that this storm has brought to our community – there has certainly been more than our fair share of that – but there is something absolutely incredible to behold in the aftermath, too
- The famous children’s tv host Mr. Rogers tells a story about being a young boy and seeing scary things happen on the news, and how his mother would always tell him to “look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”
- That’s a really important thought – speaks to something we can hold onto in the midst of tragedy and disaster – that there are, at the very least, people helping
- But, with all the respect in the world to Mr. Rogers, I think he may not go quite far enough
- You see, the miracle, the beauty that follows in the wake of disasters like the one this community is facing isn’t merely that there are people helping, people willing to look out for one another
- It’s that they do it in a way that is so contrary to our everyday experience – a way that runs utterly counter to our nature
- That’s often, I think, how we can tell that God is at work, that the Holy Spirit is active – when we see people doing things that are unexpected, that aren’t quite in line with what we might consider human nature
- Like Paul, in our reading from Acts, who decides to do something utterly unexpected, something deeply risky, when he receives a vision of a man from Macedonia, and of all things decides to listen to it – and so he sets off to Macedonia, in modern-day Greece – this is the first missionary trip to Europe, to lands that are predominantly occupied by non-Jews – and in so doing, Paul will have to convert people first to the idea of

monotheism before he can ever convert them to Christ

- And the first group he approaches are not only not Jews, but not even men at a time when only men held significant over power and influence
- Paul shows up at a women's prayer group outside the city – and there is invited to stay with and be supported by a businesswoman named Lydia – this situation may not exactly be scandalous, but it is at the very least remarkable, unexpected
- There's something quite different about the way Paul goes about his business of evangelizing the world when compared to how the world would expect him to go about it
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- Just like there is a difference between the average everyday kindness and the help that we've seen here in Jefferson City over the course of the past few days and that, I pray, we will continue to see in the days, and weeks, and months to come
- As I've spoken with many of you about the tornado and its aftermath, about the effect that it's had on us all, that difference between run-of-the-mill niceness and the transformative compassion and kindness that has been on display here in town has been a major topic of conversation
- And I've heard that difference summarized a number of different ways, but one way I think is particularly relevant was actually a quote I saw on social media just a few days ago, where someone had said this:
- "The world lends; Jesus gives"
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- The world around us, most days, wouldn't be unwilling to lend a hand, with the operative word being "lend"
- The world tends to hope for a favor in return – or perhaps some cosmic points awarded, some tally added to the good side of our ledger, perhaps
- But that isn't the way of our Messiah – that isn't the kind of love that God shows us and commands us to show to the world – that love that expects something in return
- And that type of worldly, self-serving love isn't what we've seen here in town, is it?
- We've seen neighbors helping neighbors cut limbs and clear yards and haul debris
- We've seen people wandering around and distributing food and water to anyone they see to make sure everyone is well fed and cared for as they go about the work that's needed
- We've had parishioners and Boy Scouts and families come here to the Church and clean it so thoroughly that, if it weren't for a few broken panes of glass, you'd never know a

tornado had even existed, much less passed within a block of here

- We've seen people come together and take care of each other in an incredibly selfless way, a way that runs counter to what we see in the world today
- In other words, in the wake of this disaster, we've seen the love of God on full display, at work in the world
- And that's what gives me hope for the future of this town and every other place that suffers from disasters like this one
- That in the wake of this catastrophe, humanity turns out to be even better and more compassionate and more loving than most of us ever imagined that it could be
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- And as the days go by, this storm will undoubtedly fade more and more in our memories
- And a lot of those affected will go back to living life the way we always have – the way of lending, instead of giving
- Before long, it may be easy to forget what it was like for this one shining moment of brilliant sunlight after the storm, when we realized what mattered – and came together as a community and took care of each other
- But I hope we remember these moments of compassion and love of neighbor long after we forget the howling of the wind or the churning in the pit of our stomach at the sound of the tornado siren
- The rest of the world might forget, but I hope we never do