

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# Keep My Words

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The season of Eastertide lasts fifty days from Easter to Pentecost for us to proclaim God's love is stronger than death. When we linger in the bright the light of the empty tomb, we notice it casts a shadow, and not a distant shadow, on the cross that killed.

These final Eastertide lectionary readings return us to the night of the last supper to hear Jesus prepare his followers for living in a world without him. President Asa Lee's sermon from last week likened these series of readings to flashbacks in either a movie or book.

Before his death, those disciples could not fully comprehend his message. After the resurrection, they must have rehearsed his words over and over to make sense of them. In retrospect on the night before his death, their conversation must have felt like non-sequiturs. Jesus speaks of heaven and glory, and they see only death. Their questions and answers that don't seem to connect.

Jesus tells them they know the way, alluding to the teaching and healing and loving way of life they shared. But Thomas still asks the way.

Philip wants to see the Father, frustrating Jesus to reply, "you really do not know me?" as if Philip missed all the divine signs Jesus revealed. Jesus speaks at a cosmic, eternal realm of what God's love has and will continue while the disciples remain mired in the immediate. As if grasping at straws, Judas

(not Iscariot) asks, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?”

Listen in on Jesus’ promise.

*Dear God. We often walk around confused about how to follow Jesus. We get distracted by the blaring words of the world. Frightened by the powers that took his life. Quiet us. Salve our fear with your peace. Send your spirit into these words that we know how to keep them. Amen.*

### **John 14:23-27**

<sup>23</sup> Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

<sup>24</sup> Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me.

<sup>25</sup> “I have said these things to you while I am still with you.<sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.

<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Several years ago, my husband's niece who lived in London sent an email. Her boyfriend planned to travel to Chicago, rent a motorcycle, and ride to the west coast. He'd never been to the U.S. before, let alone Chicago, and she wanted to know if we could recommend a convenient hotel.

Hint. Hint.

Of course, we welcomed him to our home. We gladly met him at the airport, helped him buy a sleeping blanket and the slim provisions he'd carry for the journey.

As it turns out, he arrived the weekend of the Kentucky Derby and the warmth of May put Chicago in full bloom. The city and lake looked great as we toured around. He tagged along with us for a race party since we knew he'd meet others from across the country.

That night we set another place at the table for a dinner party we'd already planned and placed him next to a friend who rode to Sturgis, South Dakota, each year for the Harley Davidson rally. We pulled out maps for them to methodically trace the best interstates and highways.

I admired Ben's calm demeanor as I overheard him describe travels through Europe. He willingly put himself into new places. Stopping at roadside diners, tasting food, exploring the spectacular sights along with the hokey. His questions caused me to see my city and country in a new light.

The next morning, everything turned from curiosity to terror. When I came down for coffee, he'd been up for hours with jet lag. Unable to sleep, he watched the early news of Chicago.

This world traveler asked, did we know? Did we know that last night a dozen or more people had been shot in Chicago and a couple died?

*I'll never forget* seeing his hair literally stand up, not sure if tussled from sleep or pulled in horror.

*I'll never forget* having my sense of callousness exposed. I just knew that the first warm weekend in Chicago every year would draw people into the streets and the cross hairs of gun violence.

*I'll never forget thinking*, wow, only a couple of people were killed? Usually, warm weekends result in double-digit gun deaths.

*I'll never forget* feeling my stomach sink at what I saw about myself.

Gun shots and death had become such a part of the rhythm of life that we kept count, but the numbers turned lives to statistics.

Ben sought an explanation. How do I describe hunger, illiteracy, poor housing, unemployment reaching near 50%,

and easy access to guns becoming the perfect storm? The perfect storm of persistent racism.

The matter-of-fact demeanor of the news anchor belied what we all knew, the perfect storm happened all the time, just not in my backyard.

I wondered what Ben now thought as he left our fair city.

Why does it take fresh eyes to see that the world we live in is not the way it needs to be?

This makes us uncomfortable. No one wants to talk about hatred. No one wants to talk about gun violence.

No one wants to talk about racism, particularly in a church nestled in a community where our children can safely play outside regardless of the temperature. When we are honest, we don't want to talk about death, anyone's death, even in a church that celebrates Christ's resurrection from a violent death. Can't we just sing "rejoice"?

It is uncomfortable to see the world for what it is, and this is exactly what Jesus wants. He wants us to know how violent our world is from the perspective of those who do not hold power or appease those in power. Throughout his ministry, he walked directly into the places of hatred to heal the deep divisions.

The Gospel of John was written about the year 90 of the Common Era somewhere in Ephesus for a community of believers who risked their lives as surely as Jesus' first disciples.

The writer pulled together the stories Jesus' followers told to ensure his words lived on. Those who followed him need to keep his words.

"Keep his words" is shorthand for more than his verbal instructions.

Keeping his words encompasses the lifestyle he taught that continues to challenge the world's false values.

Before he departs this earthly realm, he wants his followers to know that through everything they had seen in him—the very obviously spiritual and almighty things he had done as well as the very typical and everyday things he had done—they had seen God.

Despite the physical absence of Jesus, their daily practice of speaking and doing what he taught will ensure they continue to see God. God will make a home with them. They no longer need to hide in a locked room or remain tethered to a place out of fear.



Scholar Karoline Lewis writes, “Keeping Jesus’ words is the only thing that makes it possible to get to other side of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

And keeping Jesus’ words is the only thing that will make it possible to withstand the rejection that comes with believing that God really does love the whole world.”<sup>1</sup>

Now it is our turn. Before us is the joy to keep his words in ways unique to our time and place. Yes, it is a joy to do this hard work when we encounter God.

This demands that we stand up in ways that might make others uncomfortable or get ourselves kicked out to the margins...but, again, that is exactly where we encounter God.

Last weekend’s carnage in Buffalo and Laguna Woods reminds us that a perfect storm continues with mental illness, loneliness, increased tolerance of hate language, and in too many circles, the condoning of racist ideas.

We know enough of what Jesus said and did to know that if he walked the earth today in the same way as 2,000 years ago, he would walk right into this economic, moral, and political mess. And we also know he would stop to comfort those grieving and grieve himself at these gun deaths.

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, “Keep My Words,” *Working Preacher*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/keep-my-words>.

Let's start there with him. Let's honor the lives lost so we know these are not numbers in distant cities, but beloved children of God.

Pearl Young, age 77, spent every Saturday morning handing out food boxes from the Good Samaritan Church of God.

Ruth Whitfield, 86, spent her days caring for her husband to whom she was married for more than sixty years and in a nursing center. Who will tell him the news she was shot at a supermarket?

Andre Mackniel, 53, was just shopping for a birthday cake for his son. A son now without a father.

"Kat" Massey, 72, lived on the same street with her other siblings. She would rent a costume to become "Mr. Broccoli" at schools to teach children healthy eating.

Celestine Chaney, 65, survived aneurisms and breast cancer and retired as soon as possible to spend time with her six grandchildren.

Margus Morrison, 52, never discussed racism with his younger brother, but they both knew it was around. Morrison was a school bus aide.

Heyward Patterson, 67, called "Boy Tenny" by everyone who knew him was killed as he helped church members load

groceries into their cars. His cousin Deborah described his voice as “heaven-sent” singing R&B and hymns. She does not understand how anyone 18 years old could get so much hate.

Aaron Salter, Jr, 55, a retired police officer worked as a security guard at Tops and tried to take down the killer. In his free time, he liked to work on projects to build car engines to run on clean energy.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the country, at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, Dr. John Cheng, 52, a physician who served his church, died by charging a shooter who sought to kill as many as possible.

The bright light the empty tomb proclaims life is stronger than death. We worship Jesus by keeping his words. Do his ministry. It is frightening.

Just to say the word, “racism” may cost you plenty in some communities that want to live in this world as it is and ignore Jesus’ ministry. Whereas to walk around every day with black skin or the traits of an ethnic heritage may cost you your life.

On his way to the cross, Jesus says this: The world may kill you.

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Slater, Monika Mathur, and Rassan Nakhlawi, “What we know about the victims of the Buffalo grocery store shooting” *The Washington Post*, Updated May 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/05/15/buffalo-shooting-victims/>

Having lived a perfect life of love and justice, Jesus' body was hung on a cross, because struggling for justice is dangerous, and because love is costly. There is good reason to be afraid if all we can see is the world as it is. But we have the perspective of centuries of Jesus' followers who kept his words, who saw the realm of heaven on earth and felt God's presence.

Eastertide asks us to stare at the empty tomb, remember the cross, and keep his words.



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