

# St James United Church



## Message for May 10, 2026 Sixth Sunday of Easter

“Mothering with God” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21; and “Mother” by Lola Ridge

As important as it is that today is the 6th Sunday of Easter, I am sure that Mother’s Day is on more of your minds today. Mine too. I suspect that’s why Jesus’ saying to his disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned,” jumped out at me. That phrase carried weight because I was in a sense orphaned when my mom died a couple of months before I turned ten.

Yet as I say that, Jesus’ promise that the disciples wouldn’t be orphaned, that he’d send the Spirit as an Advocate, to be a companion to them and so to us, also rings true. I was a maternal orphan, yes, but over the years, my mom has been there in a way she never could in life, continuing to root for me, encourage me, to use the phrasing of Choktaw elder and Anglican bishop, Steven Charleston, whispering to my heart in a voice I interpret as my own. In fact there have been times when she has come to me even more strongly, there when I married Glen, coming through with encouragement several times recently in therapy, and one time when in my haste to get to Winnipeg to be with friends after a long, often frazzling stint on a remote reserve, I left without gassing up, only realizing that after I’d crossed the river on the last ferry. But as I prayed that I’d make it to the only gas station for miles and not be stuck on a highway that no one would be travelling until morning, I felt my mom’s strength, her calm and gentle assurance that I would make it. And I did. I was able to gas up, get a bite to eat and most importantly travel to a place where my heart would feel full again.

I experienced that as my mom helping, but maybe it was the Spirit. After all, if we believe deceased loved ones are in God, then in our experience of God they could be there. And while the Spirit comes to us personally, the goal ultimately is communal. Jesus wants all of us to share in the divine life he experiences with his Father, one in which we’re held by God and at the same time God comes to be held in us through the Spirit. It is a profound vision where God wants to nurture, care and protect us, joined to us in love. And not just us as a narrow group, but all people, all of life held together. Recall that Jesus opened this farewell speech with the promise that in his Father’s house there are many dwelling places. Jesus lived that, including tax collectors, “sinners,” others seen as beyond God’s love, as disciples, breaking bread with them and making clear that they were indeed loved, held by God. Doing this was a catalyst to the opposition that killed him, but he was raised as proof that his inclusive vision is indeed God’s.

And this desire of God reaches across not only social barriers but makes sure no one is orphaned across time. This is a point made in First Peter where we hear how Jesus visited the

spirits waiting in prison since the days of Noah. It's an odd reference to us but the author may be pointing to an ancient teaching we proclaim in the Apostles Creed, that Jesus descended to the dead. Orthodox Christians image this in icons of the resurrection, not a solitary Jesus walking out of the tomb but a companioning Jesus, gone to the realm of the dead where all who had died, including Noah, even Adam and Eve, were waiting to rise in God's love with him.

And God's reach may be wider, some scholars interpreting the spirits in prison as those who were unrepentant, even possibly the angels who rebelled against God and according to 1 Enoch, married humans in the days of Noah, corrupting us to be lustful, greedy and violent. What I find interesting about this interpretation is how it suggests that God wants to redeem even the devil and his minions. It's a provocative, though minority opinion, more conservative scholars saying Jesus went just to proclaim victory. Their claim seems to say more about us than God, capturing our experience of a world still struggling with evil, with the temptation to pull away from God and each other, mired in the divisiveness of war, greed and other destructive impulses. That's the case because we have free will. But God's still there, a mom loving even her most willful children, softening our harshness in the light of her understanding, accepting us as we are as she calls us to grow into who she knows we can be. I hear that in the assertion that Jesus went to those spirits, hear too a statement more for us than them, reassurance that despite how the world looks, the unifying and nurturing love of God has won, the arc of history bending toward justice.

It is bending because as Peter told the recipients of his letter, they're joined to Christ in baptism, and so are we. This is the primary way by which we are not orphaned, and also how no one else is left orphaned. The Spirit reminds us of everything Jesus taught, helps us live what he modelled. We celebrated that as a Regional Council last Sunday as we gathered to affirm that no one will be excluded from the life and work of our region. That's an important statement in our time as some branches of our faith family tree, despite Jesus' own actions, promote a much narrower version of Christianity and even seek to align with political power to enshrine their view. This is happening in Alberta where what was originally to be a forum for religious leaders to meet politicians turned into an exclusive summit about public policy being shaped by Biblical values. In response, over two hundred leaders across denominations, many United Church, wrote a public letter to remind everyone that Jesus lived a more inclusive and compassionate way. As we know, what happened is not a one off. Our faith is increasingly being fused with politics, used to hurt women, immigrants, the trans and non- binary community, disabled people, Indigenous peoples. As a result, we'll be called to make public stands more often and speak up for what is right, even if we may suffer for it. Jesus' promise to send the Spirit wasn't just to make sure we are not left orphaned so we can be sure that no one, absolutely no one in our communities is orphaned.

So, on this Mother's Day meets the Easter season, let us trust in Jesus' promise to hold us, present in the Spirit to join everyone in love and care. It feels like we're far from there, the road long and leading to a dangerous, divisive place. But she is with us just the same, reassuring us and giving good directions, making sure that we get to the loving community that we are made for, where our hearts will be made full. Amen.