
Famous Last Words on the Sunday after Ascension Day

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

The Seventh Sunday of Easter: The Sunday after Ascension Day – Year A

It's the Sunday after the Ascension, and I am thinking of famous last words. Famous last words:

"More light, more light! Open the window so that more light may come in." Those are said to be the famous last words of Goethe, the German poet, as he lay on his death bed. More light! Maybe they were spiritual words, and maybe they were simply practical. It's hard to tell when it comes to famous last words.

When Thomas Edison lay dying of pneumonia at his home, it is said that his wife leaned over and asked, "Are you suffering?" He replied, "Just waiting." And then he looked out his bedroom window and declared, "It's very beautiful over there."

Maybe we all imagine such peaceful deaths. Luther Burbank, the horticulturalist who moved to California in the early twentieth century, said simply, "I don't feel so good."

Surely, other people have actually rehearsed their last words. Even at the last, they are coherent, and even humorous. Conrad Hilton, who had assembled the huge hotel empire, the Hilton Hotels, was asked if he had any last words of wisdom for the world. He said, "Yes. Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub."

A famous grammarian, Dominique Bouhours, spent his life promoting higher standards of French language. On his death bed, he said, "I am about to – or I am going to– die; either expression is used."

Proper to the last, Marie Antoinette walked to the guillotine. Accidentally, she stepped on her executioner's foot. "Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur," she said. Pardon me. Was that a practical, or spiritual, request?

Very often, at death, the reality of our practical, earthly lives, becomes even more pronounced, more evident. The sensational Tallulah Bankhead, excited audiences with her behavior, but she was tragically addicted to drugs and alcohol. Her last words were rather miserable: "Bourbon...codeine," she gasped.

But some lives were more magnificent. Alexander Graham Bell, who created the telephone, was also a professor of vocal physiology. He married one of his deaf students, and spent forty-five years of marriage with her. His last words were spoken in sign language. His wife whispered to him, "Don't leave me." Alexander Graham Bell signed his last word, "No."

Henry Ward Beecher, the abolitionist and clergyman, was more esoteric. As he was about to die, he said simply, "Now comes the mystery."

Maybe my favorite last words are those of Lady Astor, in 1964. She was dozing, in and out of consciousness. At one point, she awoke to find herself surrounded entirely by her whole family. "Am I dying," she asked, "or is this my birthday?"

You can find other famous last words, I know. Maybe you have heard them spoken yourself. Maybe you have spoken them. What would you say, if you knew you were about to die? What would be your famous last words?

Actually, you have time to rehearse them. They do not have to come unexpectedly or quickly. You can practice them now.

Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub. It's beautiful over there. I love you. Pardonnez-moi. Now comes the mystery.

Many of us make a serious mistake when we consider what Jesus' last words were. What do we say were Jesus' last words? We have memorialized them in sermons and music: the Seven Last Words of Christ, we say. "It is finished. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. I am thirsty." You've heard them before. You've heard us preachers try to explain them.

But those were not actually the last words of Jesus. They were the last recorded words of Jesus before his crucifixion, but they were not his last words.

No, ever since Easter Day, we in the Church have been hearing the true last words of Jesus. These true last words are the ones that Jesus spoke after his resurrection. This past Thursday, the church celebrated the true last day of Jesus on earth, the Feast of the Ascension, forty days after Easter, when Jesus went to a hill outside Bethany, blessed his disciples and then –apparently– ascended into heaven. That was the true last day of Jesus' corporal body on earth.

I prefer the last words of Jesus that he spoke in that mysterious time between resurrection and ascension, the same time that we have been observing in the Church in the last forty days.

The season of Easter is certainly glorious and happy, and full of springtime wonder. That mood is festive by design. But the season of Easter is also a response to something scary and frightening. The season of Easter is a response to death. It begins, really, on Good Friday, with a death. And the conclusion of the Easter season involves another kind of death, a departure if you will, of Jesus into heaven.

Jesus does not finally die. But Jesus does leave us. It is the same way with those whom we love and who die. We know, in faith, that they live, but they do leave us. They depart: "it's beautiful over there." "Now comes the mystery."

Listen to what Jesus said during his final days:

"Do you love me? Feed my sheep." (John 21) "Do you have anything to eat?" (Luke 24.41) "Follow me." (John 21) "Peace be with you. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven." "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20).

Those are the words that Jesus truly leaves with us. They are words of love, and words of feeding. They are the words that we would do well to imitate. They are the words that we would do well to rehearse. Our last word could be at any moment.

Next week, the Day of Pentecost, celebrates some of the most glorious last words of Jesus: "Receive the Holy Spirit." The departure of Jesus in body, at the Ascension, makes way for the arrival of the Spirit, in the Body of us! – at Pentecost.

Receive the Holy Spirit. That is, the spirit of forgiveness, the spirit of peace, the spirit of feeding, the spirit of love, the spirit of the last words of Jesus. Yes, we will all die; but, more importantly, we are dying every day. We are losing something everyday. We are giving up something every day.

And so, every day, we have a chance to speak words of eternity. Every day, we have a chance not only to die, but also to be re-born.

"Am I dying," asked Lady Astor, "or is it my birthday?" When we receive the Holy Spirit of Jesus, it's the same thing.

Receive the Holy Spirit this week, and speak words of love, of forgiveness, of peace. Those are the true last words of Jesus; and they are the first words of the Spirit-filled life.

AMEN.