Leaving is hard. The hours before it is time are strained in anticipation of the leaving. My mother always took on a big project of some kind the day before we left: staining the back deck, building a rock garden, painting the family room, cleaning a closet. It used to drive me crazy that in the midst of trying to make the most of the little time we had left, she threw the house into complete chaos and threw herself into a frenzy with the job. It wasn’t until much later that I realized that the project itself was just a diversion; something to distract her and occupy the time which we had recently occupied. Because leaving is hard.

Jesus is getting ready to leave. It’s a long goodbye. Unlike my mother throwing herself into a project to divert attention away from the leaving, Jesus is trying to tell them as much as he can in the minutes they have left together. Up until now, they have been completely dependent on him: for advice and direction for the mission, but now in these final hours, Jesus is tying up loose ends, repeating and reinforcing things that he has already told them. He alone knows what the next hours, the next days will bring. There will be shock and confusion and chaos and suffering and scattering and fear and sorrow and in the face of all of that, he doesn’t want them to forget. These are the last words he will say to them before their world turns upside down. He doesn’t give them all the details because, in a line that sounds like it is straight from a Hollywood movie he tells them, “you can’t handle the truth.” Instead what he offers here is a warning and a promise: take caution, the road ahead is going to be rough but I am sending help. Its what he wants them to remember.

The road ahead is going to be rough. It should come as no surprise but it will. Over the past three years they have seen the tide of followers swell. At first it was just a few, but as word spread, the crowds grew. The disciples experienced the euphoria of the miracles and Jesus growing popularity. And they found themselves as a part of the inner circle. And very naturally, with the rise in momentum and popularity can come unrealistic expectations or swelled heads. You can get caught up in the excitement and lose perspective on reality. Because they had also seen the other side: they had witnessed the growing opposition as well as the popularity, though they haven’t ever really experienced the negativity directed at themselves. They had been on the side lines when the Pharisees questioned Jesus, on the edges of the crowd when it turned against him, they remained in his company while others deserted him, watched them pick up stones ready to hurl them at him, heard the whispers and the jeers, were aware of the plot to entrap him and kill him. So far its all been about him. But that’s about to change. In his absence, these disciples, these friends are about to become the targets: of hatred and rejection, of ridicule and cruelty. Jesus doesn’t spell it all out for them; but he doesn’t have to. They have seen it with their own eyes: how people hated him. Only now are they beginning to understand what loving him will cost. In John 15, Jesus uses the word “remain” 11 times. Remain in me, he says, over and over again. Remain. Its like telling
a dog to stay when all the dog really wants to do is bolt. Stay. Stay. Stay. That’s what Jesus is telling these friends. Stay with me. You are going to want to bolt when you see what is coming. But stay. I know its going to get rough, but stay.

Staying is hard. We aren’t really used to staying anymore. Just a few generations ago, people spent their whole lives living in the village where they were born, near their parents and siblings. Today, we might move across the country or across the world, sometimes for a few years, sometimes for a few months, and then pick up and move again. At one time, you found a job and you kept it for life, until they gave you the gold watch telling you that your time was up. Experts now suggest that the Millennials will hold not just 4 or 5 different jobs over their life time, but that they will change careers at least that many times. Brand loyalty has shifted. We change cars and unlike our parents, car makers. We change cell phone carriers and cell phones. Relationships have also changed, sometimes for the better: victims of abusive and destructive relationships are no longer forced to stay because of fear or shame. But there also can be no denying that our relationships have suffered because we no longer have staying power. Remember those vows, for better, for worse. Of course, no one thinks about the “for worse” on their wedding day. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to see clearly through the veil of love and excitement and happiness to a time when there will be struggle and pain and hurt. For better and for worse. Giving up, getting out seems like the best way forward, the only way for me to move forward, for me a move forward, a phrase that hints at the cultural shift from the two becoming one, us moving forward, toward the idea of personal individual satisfaction, what matters most here is that I am happy and fulfilled. And that’s not to say that it is a decision that is easily made because many couples do struggle and wrestle and agonize with keeping the vows that they have made. I know because I am married and Kirk and I have a real marriage, not one made of plastic. It is both the best and hardest work I have ever done. I know because I am married and the truth is that I am hard to live with and I am constantly having to give up me for the sake of us. But increasingly our culture is becoming monogamish, a word that points at our movement away from the idea of choosing one partner for life and toward the trend of having multiple relationships over a lifetime. Today, we are seeing a trend of couples who marry only for better and its over before there is even a hint of for worse. But this is just a symptom of a deeper truth: We are a fickle people; we change our minds, like we change our socks. And that’s nothing new. Jesus has experienced this in the crowds that follow him: one day they are enjoying the picnic of 5 loaves and 2 fish and the next day they are colluding with the Pharisees to plot his capture. One day they are throwing him a parade; the next day they are yelling “crucify Him!” He knows we are a fickle people. And so he tells these few disciples, these closest friends, tells them over and over, to stay. Stay. There’s going to be trouble. Its going to get rough. It is going to get worse before it gets better but for better or for worse, just stay.

I’m not sure where we ever got the idea that this Christian life was going to be a walk in the park. Whoever is peddling that kind of fantasy, obviously hadn’t read these parting words of Jesus in John’s gospel.
Nor have they considered Paul’s words about his own experience of being a disciple of Christ. It sounds less like an advertisement and more like a warning for those who think they might want to join. He writes in 1 Corinthians, “I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.” Not the best sales pitch for potential new followers. But then again, its only part of Paul’s story. Though Jesus warns these disciples that its going to get rough, he also provides a promise: I am sending help. Its going to get rough, but you are not alone. We are not alone. Isn’t that what we really want to know when we are in the middle of trouble, when we get bad news, when you are laying awake in the middle of the night, head spinning, stomach churning, when we are feeling backed into a corner or picked on, or like we are at the very end of our frayed rope? We are not alone. It had to be their worst fear. When Jesus spoke of the kind of resistance and persecution they might face because of their friendship with him, when he told them he was leaving, he told them again about the One who was coming to be with them as both an advocate and a comforter; an advocate who would stand up for them in the face of the hostility and rejection and a comforter who would understand their grief and pain. It may have seemed like a small token at the time. They most certainly would rather have had Jesus their friend stay than lose him only to have him replaced by someone they don’t yet know. But Jesus could see the big picture where the disciples only had fragments. Though they thought they were beginning to understand what he was trying to tell them, they still didn’t have a clue. It’s that saying: sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know. They didn’t know how much comfort they would need nor did they know how the presence of the Holy Spirit would propel them from fear and hiding to become a force which would transform the world, and no amount of trouble would stop them.

We will face trouble. We will have the same troubles as everyone else – cancer, financial challenges, tragedy, strained and broken relationships, pain and sorrow. And we will face trouble because of Christ. Our “troubles” may seem soft in comparison to the images we see and stories we hear of brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world but still we will know ridicule, discrimination, loss, we will be the butt of jokes. We will face rejection, people will tell us we are living in the dark ages, that we believe in fairy tales, tell us that this week’s discovery of gravitational waves proving Einstein’s theory is further evidence of the certainty of science and the foolhardiness of our faith, faith in an unseen God. Yet even Einstein believed in God, a God who ordered a beautiful and mysterious universe. Though we may not face persecution now like those first disciples, we are living in uncertain times. The road of discipleship is not paved with riches, its not easy street as some frauds would have you believe. We will be called to go to uncertain places, to speak the name of Jesus when we feel
we don’t have the words. In this world you will have trouble. He couldn’t say it any plainer. Knowing what was coming, what they would have to face, because of him, had to make his leaving even harder. But it is not Jesus last word to these friends. Take heart, he says, I have overcome the world. Take heart, because no matter how hostile, how resistant, how overpowering and domineering the world may seem, He has overcome it. The rejection, the resistance might be strong, but He is stronger. So take heart, during this Lenten journey. Literally, take heart – take a small wooden heart in your pocket or in your purse, hold it in your hand, not because it has magical powers – it doesn’t. Not because if you rub, Jesus will come and grant you three wishes, He won’t. Hold it to remind yourself day after day, moment after moment, I am God’s beloved and I am not alone.

Thanks be to God He is with us.