

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter: May 7, 2023**

Acts 7:55-60

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

The Rev. Nat Johnson

On this fifth Sunday in Easter, we are thrust back into a part of John's gospel often called "The Farewell Discourse," in the setting of an intimate meal. Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet, setting before them an example of what it means to love and be loved, and commanding them to love one another as he has loved them. He warned them that he would be betrayed and that his most ardent disciple would deny him. Jesus' words weigh heavily on the disciples, shrouding their minds and hearts with confusion and fear. It is against this backdrop that Jesus offers words of consolation and comfort:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me.*

Jesus recognizes the anxiety that comes from expectations left unmet, from the fear of the unknown. He does not scold them, suggesting that if they just toughen up, if they just had more faith, they would be fine. Instead, he embraces them fully and reminds them of their relationship with God, of their faith and of God's faithful presence. He invites them to rest in their trust, even when the state of the world or their lives is turned upside down. He promises them divine fidelity in the face of excruciating absence, demonstrating God's desire to be in communion with God's people. Indeed, his imminent absence will be necessary so that Jesus can prepare a place for them.

It is no wonder that this passage is beloved at celebrations of life. The vision of a heavenly house with many dwelling places has fueled our imaginations about life after death throughout our shared history. Whether we interpret these words metaphorically or literally, it is hard to miss the otherworldly nature of the place to which Jesus told his disciples he was going. These words provide us comfort, allowing us to taste a bit of the mystery of life beyond death, even (and perhaps especially) in our grief and loss.

But it's important to note that for John, what he calls "eternal life" is not begun at death. It is already present, already pumping through our veins, already filling our lungs, animating our bodies and our spirits. The vision of the house with many dwellings transcends the barrier of time, inviting us to embrace the fullness of life in the here and now.

But the disciples are unable to feel and hear the comfort Jesus offers them. They cannot see beyond the anxious fog, and the words they hear don't seem to click together into any kind of sense they can make. Perhaps we can relate to the disciples, to Thomas and Philip, who seem to be exasperated by Jesus' words and the reality that now lay before them. "We don't know where you're going, Jesus. How on earth can we know the way?"

I wonder, how many times in our own journey we have uttered similar words in our own hearts and minds. What circumstances in our lives have blinded us to path Jesus guides us along; what has caused us to question where we are heading and how we will get there? Perhaps, like Thomas, we want clear instructions, a roadmap marking out our path and clearly designating our destination.

Jesus responds to Thomas' question: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In the history of the interpretation of this verse, particularly in our present context, these words are often used to depict Jesus as a kind of gatekeeper, a bouncer who lets some in while keeping some out. That kind of interpretation has generated violence and hatred and has provided justification for an exclusionary depiction of salvation. But we must remember that these words were not offered to the disciples as a condition of their trust or a litmus test of their faith. Rather, these words were offered as consolation, as comfort, weighted and colored with the hope of God's promised eternal presence.

I wonder, dear People of Grace, how we might hold these words of comfort and promise this morning? What uncertainties, anxieties, and fears exist in your own hearts, in our collective heart? We stand nearly two years apart from the departure of our last Rector; a little over three years from the start of a global pandemic. We are bombarded with messages of hate and vitriol, far too often manifested in gun violence and murder. Communities of color, LGBTQIA folks, the poor and the marginalized, are increasingly under attack and the recipients of fear-based aggression. Perhaps the uncertainties and anxieties and fear you experience flow out of newly experienced grief, the loss of a beloved, a drastic change in jobs and finances, tensions, and unhealthy dynamics in family relationships.

There is a great deal about the future – both distant and not-so-distant – that might be leaving some of us weary. But Jesus holds us in a tender embrace, assuring us that we too can find comfort and solace in his words and promises. Trusting in God will not make things all roses and sunshine. Stephen, in the story from Acts, stands as a stark reminder that following Jesus as the Way often leads us into difficult confrontation. But Stephen's experience also stands as an invitation to recognize that Jesus stands with us to the end. No matter what we face, no matter the challenges that keep us from seeing clearly, no matter our lack of certainty about the world or our lives, Jesus will remain with us and will continue to draw us into the loving embrace of a God from whom we cannot be separated.

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust also in me.*

My prayer for us today, Dear People of Grace, is that we might reach out in faith regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. And that in our reaching out, we would discover that God is already holding us, already drawing us into the abundance of divine life in which all of creation is being restored. Today, let us hold fast to Christ's promises and open ourselves to the comfort of the Spirit! Amen.