

*Fifth Sunday of Easter*

May 14, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 14: 1-14)

[Jesus said to the disciples:] “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I said a little earlier, next Sunday will be my last Sunday here for a little while because of a Sabbatical. Since September, there has been a hard-working Sabbatical committee who is trying to make sure everything is covered for the summer. They’ve been asking, “What if?” all year. “What if there’s a staff issue?” “What if something happens in the community?” “What if the building blows up?” As if I would know what to do if the building blew up. They are trying to see into and prepare for a future they do not know.

In response, I keep saying to them and the staff, “You’ve got this. You have everything you need. You have resources. You have good people. You have the Holy Spirit! It’s all good.”

It makes us anxious when things change and we don't know what's coming. Think about every young person who has left for college, or who had started a new job, and isn't quite sure of the expectations. Think about everyone who has ever started over in a career, or started over in a new relationship. Think about every parent who has had that newborn put into their arms for the first time, and they are thinking, "Now what do I do with this? What will I do this little person who is depending on me?"

Now, take all of that anxiety and multiply it by ten, and you'll be getting close to the disciples, who heard the words of Jesus today. They were in the upper room, just after the Last Supper. It's not after Easter, with all of the surprise and the joy and the questions. It is just after the Last Supper.

In the Gospel of John, in the chapters before this, the religious leaders have already tried to stone Jesus. And then Jesus raised Lazarus, which put pretty much a death sentence on his head. That night at dinner, Jesus has already said, "*Little children, I am with you only a little longer. Where I am going, you cannot come.*" The disciples can see the handwriting on the wall. They know what they have is not going to this last. The disciples are anxious. "He's going away! Now what?" Think of every time you've been in that situation. "Now what will I do?" That's where these disciples are.

And Jesus says to them, "*Fear not!*" Jesus always says, "*Fear not!*" When Jesus called the disciples to leave their careers and their families and follow him, he says, "*Fear not!*" On a boat in a storm, Jesus comes to them walking on the water, and says, "*Fear not!*" On the Mountain of Transfiguration, they are seeing visions of long-dead prophets and hearing the very voice of God, and Jesus says, "*Fear not!*" Jairus comes to Jesus because he thinks his daughter is dead. Jesus says, "*Fear not!*" At the tomb on Easter morning, when the whole world, all of reality, has changed, Jesus says to the women, "*Fear not!*" Jesus always responds, "*Fear not!*"

Here we are at the Last Supper, with everything falling apart, and Jesus says, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*" "Trust me. You've got this. You have everything you need. Resources, people. I will send you the Holy Spirit. It is all good."

But even after all of their experiences with Jesus, even after the storms and visions and Jesus raising the dead – even after all those times Jesus said, "*Fear not!*" – Thomas is skeptical. "Where are you going?" he says. "And what are we going to do without you? And how do we get where you are going?" "*How do we know the way?*" Jesus offered him unexpected advice.

We want him to say, "This is exactly what you need to do. This is how you should act. This is how you should think. This is exactly what to do."

But Jesus doesn't give instructions, or a secret password, or a set of things you need to know to pass the test. Jesus doesn't say, "This is the way. Do these things and believe these things, and you'll get in."

He says, "*I am the way.*" It's in the doing, the praying, the risking, the being part of community, the searching, the longing, the trying, the trusting Jesus that we come to know God. It is a way, not a destination; a lifestyle, not a set of actions. It is a relationship, not a final exam. It is in the doing of this Christian life that the trust and the understanding come.

Jesus doesn't describe or prescribe a life of faith. We can't describe what a life of faith looks like. It's in the living with Jesus that we know Jesus.

Let me try an experiment to illustrate. It's Mother's Day. How many people here, at some point, have had a mother? I won't trust you if you haven't raised your hand. I don't want to think about just mothers today. I want to think about mothers of the heart. I want you to think about someone in your life who supported you, nurtured you, loved you beyond reason. Someone who helped you be the very best you could be, who held you when you failed. Someone who helped to shape and form you. Someone you trusted and treasured. The mother of your heart could be your mom, or a grandmom, or an aunt, or a teacher, or a mentor. Who is the mother of your heart?

Now, I would like you, in three sentences, to describe what that relationship is all about. Write me a Hallmark card that describes that relationship.

I propose that it cannot be done. Words, as we know them, cannot describe the depth, the goodness, the beloved imperfections, the uniqueness of that individual for you. Words can't describe the changes in the relationship over time. Language can't fully describe what it is like to be loved fully. We humans don't have the communication skills to describe the depth of loving care over time.

Eleven disciples were in the upper room, anxious and wanting to know what's next. Wanting to know how to navigate an unknown future. They want the answers laid out for them. They want the seven habits, the ten steps, the nine commitments, the self-help guide. It's what we all want. The instruction manual that tells us how to have a deep faith, a wonderful life, and everything that comes after death. The answer to questions, doubts, and fears. Show us that, and we will be satisfied, says Philip.

But language cannot fully describe a relationship that develops and grows over time. It can't describe how we learn and change over a lifetime. How we wrestle with questions and life events. How love is received and given. How sacrifices are received or made. Faith is not answers. It is a living relationship with God.

Instead of guidebooks, Jesus offers himself. Jesus says to Thomas, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" You are not going to be able to do it by yourself, but you don't have to. You want all the answers now, but you don't need them. The way to find God is following Jesus through a lifetime, to try and fail and give and trust.

These words are a promise, a comfort to those disciples, and to us. There is no need to panic in the midst of change, no need to search desperately for a secret key. You have what you need. God is already with you.

It is truly heartbreaking that Christians, through the years, have turned these verses into weapons. "*No one comes to the Father except through me.*" So, if you don't believe in Jesus, if you don't believe the right way, you're going to hell. They use it as a weapon to help some feel smug as insiders, and others feel condemned and excluded.

Is that what Jesus is doing here? Does he speak to these men who are anxious and afraid, and say, "Oh, and by the way, here's who's in and here's who's out"? I don't think so.

These words are hope and promise for those who have chosen the difficult and uncertain way of following Jesus. Jesus says the kinds of things we have heard from our mother of the heart. "It will be okay. I will be with you. It's a hard road, but I will go with you. It's through me that you will come to know God, and do more than you ever imagined."

Whether it's just for the summer, or a whole life change, or something new opening up before you, you've got this. "Fear not." Trust the one who promised to show the way to the disciples in the upper room, and did. Trust the one who stilled storms and raised Jairus' daughter. Trust the one who was raised from the dead to open up life for everyone.

Trust in God. Trust in Jesus.

Amen.