

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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May 10, 2020

On this fifth Sunday of Easter we seem to have gone back in time to Maundy Thursday. To back up just one chapter, Jesus has washed his disciples feet, has told them about the necessity of his death, has told them one among the disciples will betray him, has given them the new commandment to love one another just as Jesus has loved them, and, finally, foretells Peter's betrayal of Jesus on the night of his crucifixion.

And then we get to chapter 14, the beginning of what we call his "farewell discourse." After *all of this* we get from Jesus..."do not let your hearts be troubled."

Talk of the death of the man who they have been following now for three years. The man that they have left *everything* for to follow. Talk about his death and then....immediately..."do not let your hearts be troubled."

Or, even more, talk of how one of the disciples would aid in the arrest and murder of their friend. Talk of how even the closest and most faithful of the disciples would betray Jesus THREE times. And then...immediately..."do not let your hearts be troubled."

Jesus...c'mon. How could their hearts not be troubled after everything that you have just told them. See Jesus has this way of saying some wild and

life-altering things and then following it up with, “yeah but still, don’t be afraid.”

Seems like an unreasonable expectation. When “everything is shifting under their feet, when everything is changing” when there is SO MUCH unknown to not be afraid.

But then Jesus comes in and gives them the very reason for why they should not be afraid. And these, well they must be verses of comfort to the disciples then and to us know because they are some of the most popular and often quoted verses. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places, I go to prepare a place for you.” “I am the way and the truth and the life.” “Believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

And there is so much we can unpack here but for today...I want to narrow in on “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe in me. My Father’s house has many dwelling places and I go to prepare a place for you.”

I have used this verse at the graveside as assurance that there is room enough for a loved one who has died. It brings comfort to the family, perhaps allowing their hearts to be a little less troubled. It gives them hope in a heavenly realm beyond this time and space. It also allows those grieving the thought of their loved one as waiting in this home and co-preparing a place with God in one of the many rooms of God’s mansion. It gives them hope in a heavenly home filled with love.

And though a beautiful and surely comforting vision of what could be in the life to come, the life everlasting...I'm not sure it gives us the strength to let our hearts not be troubled in the disciples time or *this* time.

Because when the death of their beloved friend, Jesus, is imminent and the disciples lives are going to get turned upside-down, the assurance of some life after death is not the most comforting thing. What would be more comforting is to have them healed, to prevent death, to give the disciples assurance that their lives wouldn't be turned upside-down.

And we may resonate with that in this time. The assurance of some heavenly realm is not the most comforting thing. What would be more comforting to us right now would be a sense of security in our jobs and finances, what would be more comforting is the ability to go back to school and not have milestones in our lives cancelled. What would be more comforting is to have a vaccine for this virus and have life return to "normal." The fear and anxiety the disciples face over the unknowns of what it means to have Jesus physically gone from their lives is something we know very well right now as the fears and anxiety we face over the unknowns of what is to come, of what a post-COVID world might even look like.

The protest of the disciples begging for answers is indeed a protest that we may be familiar during this time. Because when things are changing, we indeed want answers. Answers that may not change the course of what is to come but answers that will bring us understanding so that we might better cope with what is to come.

But Jesus here says or, rather, reminds the disciples that they already know the answers. They already know the way because they know Jesus. They already know and have seen God because they know and have seen Jesus. They already know and have seen that through acts of love God is glorified and Jesus is present.

They already know that even when Jesus is physically gone from them, that he remains with them...just in a different way. He remains with them in acts of loving service. He remains with them the gift of water and bread and wine.

And so, perhaps, just maybe....we can re-figure the idea of these dwelling places in which Jesus refers to one that does not just have to do with eternal life. Now, to be clear, I'm not trying to rip the carpet out from under those who find comfort in the image of a heavenly mansion where Jesus has crafted dwelling places within the love and presence of God. But rather I'm trying to suggest that perhaps the perceived eschatological focus of this passage - the understanding that these dwelling places are only for the end-times - limits the strength of this passage.

Because this is the Easter season after all....we know that death has been defeated and will not have the last word...we know that those dwelling places have already been created...and so the question then becomes, in light of the resurrection and in light of this dwelling place in which God has created for us...we should not let our hearts be troubled because all has been achieved. And that, in this, God has broken into the world in ways that we never could have expected --that God creates for us a dwelling place here and now.

Jesus doesn't promise the disciples that they will not experience grief after his death. Jesus in fact does the opposite, he tells them that things will be hard. But he here reminds us that even when the strength of those fears and anxieties overwhelm, he has already created a place for us. And that gives us hope when much seems hopeless because it reminds us that, as commentator Debi Thomas says, "God is roomy. God is generous. God is hospitable. God can handle your doubts, your fears, and your questions. And God's offer of belonging extends far beyond the confines of this mortal life. "I go and prepare a place for you," Jesus says as he stands in the shadow of his own cross. You have a place with me. You have a place with God. *You have a place.*"

And so, though the disciples may feel overwhelmed right now - though we may feel overwhelmed right now, we can rest knowing that God has given us a place in this world *and* in the next so that death does not have the last word.

In the next part of chapter 14, directly after this reading, Jesus assures the disciples of the Advocate - the Holy Spirit which is being sent to them. This Spirit will remind them of all that Jesus has taught them and remind them that though not physically present Jesus still dwells in this world and ,in fact, *within them* in their hearts. Within us in our hearts.

A Spirit that will remind them that the disciples know the Way that is spoken of in today's passage... the Way that is Jesus Christ...the Way that is love. And so, out of thankfulness for God's abundant promises, over God's

abundant dwelling places *here and now*, that we have the opportunity to carry on Jesus' mission of love. With the hope that through this love, Christ's love reflected in acts of love here and now, our hearts can begin to not be troubled.

Amen.