

Yr. A, Easter 5
May 10, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1422 words

Lessons: Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

And *then* Jesus says to his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Too late for *that!* Judas, the betrayer, has just left the dinner table to go get the police. The *last* place you would want to be in the capital city of Jerusalem is in the same room with the latest outsider who claims to be the Messiah.

The problem with Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, and the Sanhedrin Council (which does their bidding) is that they don't just kill the guy claiming to be the Messiah. They also torture and murder all of his followers.

So, the hearts of the disciples *were* troubled; they were *deeply* troubled. They needed to hear something honest and hopeful from their leader. Incidentally, these two things—honesty and hope—are not mutually exclusive. In fact, hope depends *completely* upon honest truth, even when it's hard to hear.

What are *you* hearing that sounds too hard right now? I'm hearing this pandemic is likely to drag on for a long time. I'm hearing that the number of unemployed people continues climbing. I'm hearing that the most vulnerable people are not getting all that they need, while many of the least vulnerable have already cashed in. I'm hearing about angry protestors now bringing assault weaponry to state capitols. I'm hearing about vigilante *injustice* being murderously perpetrated by people with a hunch. In summary, I'm hearing the further tearing of the delicate fabric of trust in our civil society. It's all so...very...biblical.

Well, where's the hope in all of *that honesty*? Fair question. We're going to have to dig more deeply into our sacred stories for some kind of answer.

So, walk with me through the bustling markets where regular people are bartering fruits and vegetables, oils and spices, milk and honey. Let's make our way along the stone streets and densely clustered houses with children laughing and playing under the watchful eyes of their mothers. It's a normal day in Jerusalem...*except* for a man named Stephen. For Stephen, it's an *extraordinary day*. It's the day he is *so filled* with the Holy Spirit of God that he sees a vision of God's glorious, heavenly presence, and Jesus standing there at the right hand of God.

Unfortunately, regular people like Stephen were not allowed to be heavenly visionaries, especially if they were in the minority...especially if they claimed to be part of some other kingdom which cannot be manipulated by the authorities.

The problem for Jesus and his followers is that they claimed to belong to a kingdom that was not *of this world*. They claimed they were beloved children of a heavenly Father who could not and *would not* be manipulated by people with earthly authority and control. They believed in—and *prayed for and worked for*—a vision in which God's kingdom would *come* and God's merciful will would be done *on earth*...as it is in heaven.

Don't underestimate how threatening our Lord's Prayer *still is* to those (including ourselves) who enjoy power, control, or privilege. Jesus literally taught us to pray for the destabilization of the *status quo*...the way things 'normally' are. Jesus taught us to pray with honesty and hope, even when it's hard to say...or hear.

In the lynching of Stephen, the vigilantes *covered their ears* as they arrested him. They did not want to hear of a vision they couldn't manipulate. They did not want to listen to a point of view they couldn't control. They refused to tolerate any public speech which threatened their status. Like all prophets who are blessed with a heavenly vision of God's merciful kingdom, Stephen's uncomfortable truth had to be silenced. And so, they stoned him, *outside* the city gates where the regular people would not see or hear.

Thank God for St. Luke, who recorded all these stories in the Acts of the Apostles. Because of St. Luke we get to hear the *rest of the story* about this Spirit-filled man named Stephen with the face of an angel. We get to see a young man named Saul, an accessory to this violence, on whom God did *not* give up hope. We get to hear the trust of Stephen who prayed, "Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit." And *then* we get to hear the *real proof* of Stephen's honesty and hope when he prays for his enemies, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." That's when you *know* somebody is for real—when they sound as honest and hopeful as Jesus.

Now, we are ready to go back to the last supper, and hear the comforting words Jesus speaks to his deeply troubled followers. It is one of the most beloved metaphors in the entire New Testament. Jesus says, "In my Father's House there are many dwelling places...." The disciples ask, "How can we know?" What they are really asking is, "How can we trust you?"

The answer Jesus gives is both simple *and* difficult. It's simple in the sense that it is not complex. It's difficult in the sense that it *was not...and still is not easy to trust* when our hearts are deeply troubled. We're tempted to say, "Lord, we don't *know* the way, how *can we* know the way?" His simple, difficult, honest, and hopeful answer remains the same: Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Now, let's be perfectly clear about one thing. Jesus does not say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" in order to be exclusivist or arrogant, and *certainly not* for *us* to be exclusivist and arrogant. Remember—nothing about Jesus' entire life and ministry *ever* turns out to be exclusive or arrogant—just the opposite!

In the face of an exclusive and arrogant group of religious and political leaders who tenaciously and violently guard their power, control, and privilege; Jesus offers *his way, his truth, and his life* as a fresh, new, and completely accessible alternative for everyone.

The way, the truth, and the life of Jesus was accessible to all of those troubled disciples at the last supper, including Matthew, who collected taxes for Rome, *and also* Simon, the zealot, who totally opposed the taxation by Rome.

The way, the truth, and the life of Jesus was accessible to Thomas, who doubted he would be able to find his way, *and also* to Philip who demanded more information before making up his mind.

The way, the truth, and the life of Jesus was accessible to Stephen, who was the portrait of courage under fire, *and also* to young Saul, standing with the cowards who murdered Stephen.

The Good News in these very troubling times is that the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus are still accessible to everyone.

The well-known monastic, Thomas Merton, once offered this counsel. First, let's begin where we are...with the honest and hopeful assurance that the Holy Spirit of God dwells within us. Second, let's also recognize our freedom (under any circumstances) to deepen this gift which we already have. Then, we will realize we are already there. All we need is to *experience* what we already possess.¹ What we possess—and therefore, what we can share—is the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus, **and that is**, in essence, the way, the truth, and the life of love.

¹(qtd. in Martin L. Smith, *A Season for the Spirit*, p.45.)

Well, here's the twist.

The most marvelous description of this way, truth, and life, was composed by none other than the man who held the coats of the cowards who murdered Stephen. I believe that young man named Saul heard something from Stephen that day outside the walls of Jerusalem that he never forgot. It was like honest and hopeful medicine for his heart of stone.

And so after Saul's own conversion, *he* was finally able to see clearly how the way of Jesus is patient and kind. The truth of Jesus is never...boastful or arrogant or rude. The life of Jesus does not rejoice in *any* wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. *His* way, his truth, and his life bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things. Jesus' way of love never ends. And *that means* this love is still accessible to everyone, always and everywhere.

So, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." The way of Jesus is a gift we *already possess*. It is a gift we have the freedom to deepen. It is the gift we have the privilege to share. And it's never too late for that.

Amen.