

5-10-26 sermon

John 14.1-7, 15-21

Those of you who follow the Lectionary will have noticed that I've gone back to the Gospel passage from last week, and included part of it with this week's reading. Those words from the beginning of John chapter 14 are some of the most familiar words in scripture, even for those who rarely set foot in church buildings, for they are words often read at funerals. I read them at my mother's funeral a couple of months ago. They are words that have brought comfort to countless people in countless places. They stir within us the hope that this painful farewell is not a final farewell. The hope that one day we will be reunited with our loved ones, because, Jesus says, "In my father's house are many mansions." At least, he would have done, if he spoke King James' English. "And I go to prepare a place for you."

"Let not your hearts be troubled."

Words that are deeply comforting, because our hearts *are* so often troubled, by all manner of things. But especially troubled by the loss of loved ones. Perhaps even more so by the *anticipated* loss of loved ones. And so these words, spoken by Jesus to his disciples at what we call the Last Supper have been a source of comfort for countless people down through the years, including, I imagine, many of us here this morning. In theological terms, this is *future* eschatology: eschatology being anything connected with the "last things;" and it's *future* eschatology because it's unrealized – it hasn't happened yet. It's no wonder we hear these words in this way, because of the context in which we so often hear them – funerals – and because of what those words do within us at those times. They bring comfort even simply from their familiarity. Hearing those words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled..." at a funeral evokes all the *other* times we've sat in similar places, and connects us to all the people we've gathered to say that farewell to in years past. The fresh grief of *this* loss evokes the grief of all those other losses. *And* hearing those same words spoken often does bring to mind that "great cloud of witnesses," waiting for us to join them in that place where there are many mansions. They are words of hope and comfort. And rightly so. I will never *not* read those words at a funeral when I am given the opportunity to do so. But I also wonder how those words were first heard – and understood – by those to whom Jesus spoke them. I wonder if *they* took comfort from them in the same way we so often do, or if they heard something quite different in them. Let's join them in that upper room for a while and listen in once more.

If you were here on Maundy Thursday, you heard most of what transpired before Jesus speaks these words: Jesus washes his disciples' feet; tells them that one of them will betray him to the Judaeen authorities; and then gives them a new commandment, that they love one another as he has loved them. He also says, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Judaeans, so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

Peter responds, “Lord, *where* are you going?” Jesus says, “Where I am going you cannot follow, but you will follow afterward.” Peter blurts out – as is his wont – “Lord, why can’t I follow you *now*? I’m willing to lay down my life for you.” And there it is. The thing that the disciples have been so slow to accept. Perhaps have *refused* to accept. The reality that Jesus is going to die. His enemies are closing in, and will make good on all their threats. Finally Peter acknowledges that – out loud – for the first time and makes the bold assertion that he’s ready to lay down his life for Jesus. There it is. Out in the open. Unavoidable now. Jesus is going to die. To be killed by the leadership of his people. As he looks around the table at the faces of his disciples after Peter says this, what did he see there? Shock? Residual disbelief? Perhaps Jesus saying, “you cannot follow, but you will follow afterward,” caused some of them to imagine themselves sharing the same fate as their rabbi.

Whatever emotions and thoughts were displayed on their faces, under all of that I’m sure lay a deep sadness. And into the silence that no doubt followed his declaration Jesus speaks these words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.” I don’t think he’s trying to calm them, or reassure them because he is leaving them. I wonder if he’s trying to *steady* them, *because they will remain*. The temptation to allow fear to determine what they’ll do next must have been great. Jesus has just told Peter that for all his bluster, he’s going to deny he even *knows* Jesus. “Let not your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid.” Hold fast to what you know, and hold fast to this: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. And I’m going to prepare a place for you. Then I will come again, and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” This is why I wanted to include last week’s Gospel reading with today’s reading. Because I think it was deliberately paired with the passage I preached last week from Peter’s first letter, which was about being “living stones” being built into “a spiritual house.”

“In my Father’s house are many dwelling places.” The Greek word John uses for “house” here is rarely used in scripture. John only uses it twice in the entirety of his Gospel, here in verse 2 of chapter 14, and then again in verse 23, which reads, “Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our dwelling place (‘house’) with them.” That unusual Greek word bookends the passage, inviting us to read these two passages which the Lectionary divides, as a single unit.

Jesus is going to leave them. “But if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” Then he says, “My father and I will come to you and make our dwelling place with you.” Because, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.” So, is all this that Jesus is describing really *future* eschatology? *Is* Jesus saying, “I’m going to prepare a place for you in *heaven*, and then one day – thousands of years from now – come again and take you to myself?” Or is this *realized* eschatology, something Jesus says will happen in the future – and then *does*, just a few days later?

That's what Dr Craig Keener outlines in his commentary on John's Gospel. One of my favorite bible scholars, whose son just happens to be married to Jeff and Pam Wilson's daughter. Dr Keener argues – as do most scholars – that “the Father's house” is a reference to the temple. So, after he *is* killed, raised from the dead, and then ascends to be with the Father, leaving the disciples behind, Jesus promises them, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. Just in a different way. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you *forever*. This is the Spirit of truth, and *that* is how the Father and I will make our dwelling place with you. *You* will be the temple, where the Father and the Son manifest themselves in the power of the Spirit. Yes, your hearts are troubled. And rightly so. But the worst things are never the last things. So even though you're afraid, let not your hearts be troubled. Because nothing will change. And *everything* will change. I'll still be with you, just in a different way. I'll be present to you in the person of the Holy Spirit, within the community of the Spirit, my father's house – the temple – which is now *all y'all*.” Which is how Jesus would have expressed that if he spoke Texan-English. “And the call to discipleship will be the same: If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Because I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.”

Now, I grew up in a tradition that loved that statement. But we made it about *belief*: if you believed in Jesus, then you could be saved. But that's not what “the way” means as Jesus uses it. Thomas asks, “How can we know the way?” “I am the way, Thomas. If you know me, you know the Father. Thomas – you've been with me. Watched what I do. Heard what I teach. You know *me*, and so you know *the way*.” At the very beginning of his Gospel, John introduces Jesus as the divine *logos* – “the word.” Jesus is the embodiment of the divine Wisdom, and in the wisdom tradition, “way” or “ways” always refers to *behavior*, not belief. From Proverbs: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge God, and God will direct your path.” God will show you the way. “Believe God, believe me,” Jesus tells them. “You know the way. I *am* the way. So, if you love me, keep my commandments. I know your hearts are troubled. I know you're afraid. So I'll send you the Comforter, the Spirit. You already know him, because he abides *with* you. And in a few weeks from now, (on the feast of Pentecost), he will be *in* you! I'm not going to leave you orphaned; I am coming to you – after the worst thing. Because the worst thing will *not* be the last thing. Because I live – you will live! On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I in you. You have the commandments – keep them, because you love me. *This* is the way. And *in* that way lies truth and life.”

The promise Jesus makes the disciples in the midst of all their fear is not that he's providing a way *out* of it. He's providing a way *through* it. And it's just the same – “Keep my commandments,” especially the new one: “love one another.” That's it. That's the way. The way that is truth and life. The way that will save you. And it's the same promise that Jesus makes us. “Let not *your* hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe in me.” You are now my Father's house – we have made our dwelling in you!”

Even Peter – who had to go through the trauma of doing exactly what Jesus said he would, deny he even knew Jesus – even Peter came to know the truth of Jesus’ words, so he could write to other members of the Way, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” So yes, the words we so often hear at funerals are *realized* eschatology: Jesus has prepared a place for each one of us, and has taken us to himself. But not in heaven, but here, as part of his church. We are called to live “the way,” in order to experience the life he’s promised. *And* there *is* still an element of *future* eschatology in those words. Because this side of eternity, we’re never fully going to experience the life God wants for us, until that day when Jesus returns to set all things to rights, once and for all.

So, do not let your hearts be troubled. Not because there’s nothing to fear – because clearly, there is at times – but because that fear exists in the presence of love. *God’s* love, made manifest in community. You and I are members of “the way.” Together, we are the dwelling place of God. The community of the Spirit. And whenever we find ourselves echoing Thomas’s words, “we don’t know the way,” “we don’t what to do,” Jesus speaks the same words to us: “I am the way. And the truth. And the life. So, if you love me, keep my commandments. Especially the new commandment – love one another, as I have loved you.”

This is the way.