

5 Easter, Year "A" [RCL]: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-4

Title: The Way

I think some of the best television is in the commercials. A case in point was a commercial for an authentic Mexican salsa. You may recall it. The cowboys are gathered 'round the campfire eating their days-end meal. One man sort of wriggles his nose, looks askance at the salsa and says, "Where'd this salsa come from?" Another reaches over and picks up the bottle, reads the label and announces, "New York City." All eyes turn toward the cook and in unison they all exclaim, "New York City!?!". And with all eyes still trained on the poor cook a lone voice says, "String him up boys."

I guess the moral of that story is that it's not always easy being a trail cook. But the point of today's readings might very well be this: It is not always easy to be a Christian. But more importantly, it is not always easy to hear and to incorporate into our lives Jesus' call to trust him all the way so that then our hearts might then not be troubled.

Jesus was in conversation with his disciples. He is with his disciples in the upper room. There has been a meal. Later in the evening there will be betrayal. But for now Jesus is in conversation with his disciples and this will be his last conversation with them. Some Biblical scholars refer to this part of John's Gospel as Jesus' Farwell. So, we might expect that Jesus, knowing that these would be the last words he would speak to his most devoted disciples and those in whose hands he would entrust the task of the building of his church – Jesus might consider this moment and these words to be pretty important.

And so in this discourse, we find two of the disciples, Thomas, and Phillip, all beseeching Jesus to tell them where he is going so that they might follow him. What I want us to notice here is that Jesus refuses to answer their questions with a physical description of where he is going and where the disciples might later find themselves.

Earlier, Peter has implored Jesus saying, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus’ answer is essentially, “Peter, you will know the answer to that question soon enough. But for now there are some things more important I want to talk to you about.

And so Jesus goes on to say, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe in me.” And Jesus assures his disciples that where he is going they will, in fact, also be going. But in answer to none of his questioners does Jesus have much to say about *the nature* of the place he is going. Rather, he always comes back around to talking about *the path* that leads to it. For example, he says to Thomas: “You know the way.” To which Thomas so much as says, “Lord, we don’t even know where you are going, how in the world can we possibly know the way to catch up to you?”

Jesus’ response is that he IS the way. And not only is he the “the way,” but also the truth and the life – that is to say not only a life of meaning here on this earth but even life eternal.

Notice again that Jesus never talks about the *place* that is beyond this life – not in physical or descriptive terms. Rather, he talks in metaphorical terms about mansions with many rooms, but he clearly prefers to talk about the path to life for he knows that that is what is important. Follow the path and you will find your way to where Jesus would lead and God would have you go. Follow the path and the place will be revealed. Follow the path and you will indeed wind up

where God would have you be and where there is life abundant. This is the message that Jesus would have his followers to hear.

So, if the way is so important, it behooves us to know something of what this 'way' is.

As you probably already know, the early church was not called the Christian church. That term would only come about later. No, the early church was simply called: The way. And dear ones neither then nor now is the way so much about knowing stuff as it is about being – being in relationship – being in relationship with God, with the things of God, the mind of God, the voice of God, and And THEN to be in relationship with one another and all of creation. At its core, THE WAY is relational.

If the disciples will but heed Jesus' voice and follow his example they are well on their way. But even in this his final hour Jesus is trying to get his disciples to see beyond the physical, the concrete and focus on certain spiritual realities.

Jesus said to his disciples: Believe in God; believe also in me. And in the very next breath Jesus is reminding them that he is the way; imploring them really to remember all that they have seen and heard.

I in no way think that when Jesus here speaks of belief he is talking about intellectual assent to some creedal statements or set of right beliefs. He is not talking about a list of theological understandings or dogma that one must sign on to in order to become a part of 'the right believing religion'. Jesus never talked about such things. Rather, he talks about committing the whole self to the love and care of God. He is talking about taking that path and coming to that place where one has a sense of the holy and of being in communion and harmony with it.

Jesus would have the disciples and he would have us know that to abide in Christ is to have, in a very real sense, reached the intended place -- even as our earthly journey continues and to have reached the starting line of where eternal life begins.

But what does that mean? What does that mean to us in practical, everyday terms? What does such a thing mean in terms of what we do, and as I sometimes say... what we think and imagine?

The fact is we sometimes find ourselves asking the same question that Thomas asked: "Jesus, what IS this way? How can we know the way if you won't even tell us what is the destination? .

And the answer for us is the same as the answer Jesus gave to Thomas. "Follow me. For I am the way, the truth, and the life." Go where I go. Do as I have done. Act as I have acted. Pray as I have prayed. Be as I have been. Love as I have loved. Do these things and you will be on your way."

When Jesus said, "I prepare a place for you," he used the Greek word, *topos*, which can mean a physical place, but it can also mean 'a condition, an opportunity, a way of being.' So, it is entirely possible to translate this passage as: I came to prepare you for a new way of being

This section that we encounter this morning from the Gospel of John has been called by some the essence, the pinnacle, the climatic point in this Gospel. Why? Because it says it all. It says who Jesus was and who we are called to be in Him. It speaks of the place into which we are invited to enter and have our being.

But says Philip, "I want to see the Father. I want the real thing. I want the essence."

And Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

When we see the Father. When we see the Christ. When we see the Father through Christ, we see not One who calls us into stagnation, but rather One who calls us into new life – a new way of being. We see *not* One who calls us to *exclude*, but rather to include. We see *not* One who calls us to indulge hate but who rather calls us to love. We see *not* One who calls us to dwell on and nurture that which has been visited upon us in evil, but rather to forgive.

When we see the Father we see *not* One who invites us to nurture that which was comfortable yesterday, but we encounter the One who demands that we seek and embrace that which expands our horizons and expands our understanding of what it means to live a life where the rule of life is love and where God is invited to dwell among us.

Early on in the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, a reporter asked the new Pope to comment on the troubles in the American Roman Catholic Church. The Pope replied that the church does not exist in a vacuum. It is composed of people and when people touch the church they bring all their humanity. In other words, the church is humanized. This is no surprise. It simply means that the church then is called to imagine how it is to respond through the lens of the Gospel, and then to continue being the church, with the refrain of Christ in our ears, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

This is as of true of individual Christians as it is the church. That is, we too are called to imagine how it is to respond to life through the lens of the Gospel, and then continue on our path with the refrain of Christ in our ears, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

Reflecting on his career, a former Presiding Bishop of our Church, Frank Griswold, has written that through the various times, events, and stages in his life, he has come to realize that what had been demanded of him was "an expansion of consciousness and a capacity to make room for the unfamiliar and the 'other'." ¹ The 'other,' he says sometimes included "other ecclesial and religious bodies -- some similar to our Episcopal life, but others quite different [but yet which] also speak of God's passion for reconciliation, which lies at the heart of the Resurrection." My experience and my observation is that one is always subject to being criticized, if not ridiculed, for believing Rabbi Jesus when, by way of the parable of the Good Samaritan, he made the radical claim that everyone is our neighbor – not just those who live next door, not just those who look like us, or talk like us, or dress like us, or even worship like us. All of God's children are our neighbors; our brothers and our sisters.

But Griswold went on to pose a few questions such as: How is Christ seeking to "Easter" in us? In you? And in me? "How is the Risen One," he asks, "drawing us out of ourselves into new places of being and discovery through the seasons of our lives, through our struggles and our joys? How is Christ seeking to expand our hearts and make us more authentic practitioners and ambassadors of Christ's reconciling love?"

Good questions all. But Griswold leaves us not only with questions, but also with a prayer. And that prayer is that no matter how we answer these questions for ourselves in the particular, the answers will come about only because we can say along with St. Paul: It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And we pray that

¹See Episcopal Life, May, 2002, Vol. 13, No. 5, p.31

prayer though knowing that it is a hard thing, indeed a very hard thing to achieve.

And I would add to the Bishop's prayer that as we live and as we pray, and as we continue on our individual journeys, and as we continue to be the church, we hear in the background, as an ever present echo, Jesus' call to "not let your hearts be troubled." Do not let your hearts be troubled because indeed God is with us and God has prepared a place for us.

That place is not always easily found. And once found it is not always a place wherein it is easy to live. But it is into such places that we are called and it is into such places Jesus has prepared for us enter into – indeed beckons us toward.

Amen.