



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, May 10, 2020
The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Alison J. Turner,
Associate for Children and Family Ministry
on
John 14:1-14
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We don't know where you are going...how can we know the way?

Thomas, as we know from our recent post resurrection narrative, could always be counted on to pose the straightforward, yet difficult questions. With the persistence of a child on a long car journey, he would be the one that pleads: Are we nearly there yet?

His honesty simply puts into words the question everyone else is thinking, or wondering. He risks being misunderstood, even needy but is simply being himself in wanting assurance from Jesus as he asks, **we don't know where you are going...**and so he continues, **how can we know the way?**

From the intimacy of the Upper Room scene where we return today, we recall a place for food and fellowship, noise and silence, fear and hope, firsts and lasts each running in parallel, side by side. Jesus has already given the disciples words of assurance, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God and believe in me" these beautiful words, comforting words. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe in me"

Jesus speaks confidently into the gaze of Peter who will deny him, Judas who will betray him, to Thomas who it seems *always* questions him, to a quieter disciple Philip, who too is now yearning to make sense of this precious, yet parting time. As Jesus surveys the room maybe too catches the eye of others, in whose lives dwell, unnamed concerns, conflicts of the heart and we hear him speak, too to the silent ones, the anxious ones, to the ones in mourning, those anticipating grief, who have lost their way, to those who simply need to hear those words of comfort, so familiar to us all "Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe in me". Trust me.

Scripture is filled with many words of comfort from poetry to Psalmody, "to God who is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psalm 45:1-2) to the opening line of Handel's Messiah when we hear the bold proclamation of Isaiah 49:1 "Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people". You will all have your own words you hold dear. Perhaps echoing the centering words, we too will hear today after the absolution, a portion of the liturgy, which is unique to the Anglican tradition: "Hear what comfortable words our Savior Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him". (BCP, p.76). This familiar recitation of verses serves to bring us strength and assures us of the compassion and confession at the core of our Christian faith.

You may well be familiar with the words of today's scripture from a funeral or burial service words, comfortable words that accompany the movement: As the body is brought slowly into church or is carried out with dignity for one last time, as the funeral pall is gently draped over the coffin or removed at the end of the service, or, as people gather at a graveside, words of blessed assurance, of hope, of life are solemnly recited. Words from scripture alongside the rites of the prayer book are wrapped around those who watch in grief like a comfort blanket, assuring them, assuring us of the promise of glory, of light and peace in abundance for our brother, sister we no longer see. Our brother or sister who is safely home with the Father, and in a home as we hear in the King James Version, is one of many mansions.

A home that has been lovingly prepared for us, never with a sign "No room at the inn" but one that exudes "Welcome" and "Vacancies in plenty". A place to rest, to be safe, to be secure, to call home. Or to use a phrase associated with Julian of Norwich, to be ultimately "enfolded in love". For to dwell with God, to abide, to live, are all comfortable words, which signify being in a life giving relationship with God, beyond our imagination, beyond our belief and in one that lasts forever.

At a friend's wedding 25 years ago Upstate, in Pearl River, NY the Officiant included these words in the ceremony, "May your home be the place you most want to be". Even this may be a challenge for some as the shelter-in-place, this pausing era continues. In contrast, as many are away from home I recall an old poster of a kitten asleep on a tiny flowerpot, bearing the caption, "Whenever you are at peace with yourself anywhere is home." Perhaps this peace is true for you. And yet others continue to have nowhere to call home, are itinerant or simply stuck in unfamiliar places at this time, isolated from those with whom they long to be. While others seem resigned to our current time and are embodying the refrain from Michael Rosen's, *We are going on a bear hunt*.... "there's no going round (over or under it), you've got to simply get through it."

In recent weeks many have shared reflections on what or even where is home, as well as the people and even things they had taken for granted. For many the familiar rituals and rhythms that usually punctuate the week, as well as those that frame or mark our lives are too, on pause, are missing. For some this has included missing chance to be by their side, to hold their hand, to say goodbye to a loved one, and accompany them to their final resting place.

Consequently, many are experiencing an uncommon grief amplified by the waiting and the absence of the comfortable, familiar words woven into a liturgy, which both marks our time and carries us through the threshold of life and death, and into the promise of new life. For some the lack of words and rituals of comfort has been derailing, disorientating leaving some who mourn with imploring questions, of feeling lost, or even uncertain, like Thomas left wondering: **we don't know where you are going....** or even **where I am going?**

On Good Friday this year, many of us watched disturbing scenes of bodies being loaded into refrigerated trucks and mass graves being dug by bulldozers on Hart Island. Graves previously dug by prisoners for unclaimed individuals, the homeless, the indigent, and also those who cannot pay for a loved one's funeral, and be soothed with the words of commendation: "Give rest, O Christ, to your servant(s) with your saints, where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting"

In all these images of disturbance and uncertainty our gospel reminds us in the midst of tragedy, in the midst of grief, and in those waiting to say goodbye, to take comfort, to take heart. A place has been prepared for you, for me, for those we love, where tears will be wiped away, where there are no waiting lists, or restrictions determined by how much we were or not loved in this world, where we lived or didn't live, only the enormous capacity of God's love.

A place prepared, as Cardinal Basil Hume describes, "...where we will discover that all we thought and experienced about love were but hints of the real thing, when we are together, at one with God."¹

These earthly hints of glimpses of love calls us now to believe, to trust, to follow him. The Way, the Truth and the Life.

For He is the Way, not just someone who signals where to go, or comes alongside us but the very Way itself. The Way to the Father.

For He is the truth. He is the truth that demands us to choose a way of liberation and reconciliation in the face of violence and injustice, to give voice to those who have no voice. He is the truth that will set us *all* free.

And in this our transitory life, and when we feel lifeless, He is the life, that comforts, that leads us through, to God, to the Father, and to our eternal home.

Some words of John Donne (1571-1631) *Dean of St Paul's Cathedral*

Our Last Awakening

*Bring us, o Lord God, at our last awakening
into the house and gate of Heaven,
to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
no fears or hopes, but one equal possession;
no ends or beginnings, but one equal eternity,
in the habitations of thy glory and dominion,
world without end.*

¹ The Mystery of Love, Cardinal Basil Hume 2000 p 91-92