

Sunday, May 10, 2020
Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

John 14.1-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/260706281743745/>

(Sermon begins at about 14:20)

“How Can We Know the Way?”

The first part of our Gospel reading will sound familiar to many of you. Of course, we do hear it once every three years in our lectionary. But it will be particularly familiar to those who have ever attended one or more Episcopal funerals. This first part is one of the recommended Gospel readings for funerals. And, in my experience, it is the most popular. I don't know how many times I have had to preach on this Gospel at funerals. Okay, I do know. Of the 45 funerals I have preached at, 31 used John 14.1-6 as the Gospel. I think the reason this particular Gospel is so popular—that it is so comforting—is its talk about us being welcomed into God's realm, into heaven; that Jesus promises that he goes to prepare a place for our loved ones who have gone before and to prepare a place for us. When I preach on this Gospel, I almost always talk about how this passage is not about location—about dwelling places in heaven—but is really about relationship. About the ideal of relationship epitomized by that of Jesus and God; that we are invited into that relationship; and how the model of the relationship Jesus and God share is to inform our own relationships.

While I still believe this passage is first and foremost about relationship—always a worthy focus for a sermon—what captures my attention today is our friend Thomas. Yes, that Thomas. “Doubting Thomas,” who we heard on the Sunday after Easter. Thomas only appears a few times in the Gospels. He only speaks three times, and only in John's Gospel. First when Jesus and the disciples learn of the death of Lazarus; here in this reading; and then at Easter. But when he does talk, his words and their intent speak volumes. Today's two sentence speech by Thomas is no exception. After Jesus says, “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going” (Jn 14.3-4). Thomas responds with “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (Jn 14.5).

In our own time, Thomas' interjection could be tweaked ever so slightly. “Lord, we do not know where we are going. How can we know the way?” As I discussed in last week's sermon, we are in a “time between”—between what was and what is to come. Seven weeks into the “Safer at Home” order, seven weeks into our diaspora from our worship space, and at the very beginning of a measured opening of some stores and activities, we are getting antsy. We want to know when we will be allowed to return to life as normal. And for St. Gregory's, when will be able to return to our church? While those are all valid feelings, valid questions, the answer continues to be “we don't know yet.” As I said during last Sunday's announcements and in my pastoral letter later that day, our Bishop is developing a plan for that eventuality.

And while these are valid questions and concerns on all our minds, I think there is an even more important question to be asked. The variation on the questions Thomas asked. “Where are we going? How can we know the way?” Whether any of you have thought about it or not, whether any of you realize it or not, St. Gregory’s will never be the same again. The entire Church will never be the same again. This time in diaspora away from our physical space; this time of social distancing; this time of virtual worship; this time of increased and deepening relationship that you are developing; this time of plumbing greater spiritual depths that many of you are engaging in; has changed who we are as the Body of Christ. Has changed how we function as the Body of Christ. Has and will continue to change how we do and be church.

Earlier this week, the Diocese of Los Angeles had our annual clergy conference. Instead of two days at the Mission Inn in Riverside, we met for the better part of a day via Zoom. And the primary topic of our presentations and of our breakout discussions was the question of what the church will look like post-COVID-19. We were blessed to have with us Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and the Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers, Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism, Reconciliation and Stewardship of Creation—both insightful and prophetic voices in the Church, not to mention incredibly inspiring speakers. Both who, by virtue of their jobs, have their fingers on the pulse of the Episcopal Church and what is going on in the Church because of the pandemic.

And while they both probably have more insight and clarity into the current situation than many in our church, they also were honest that we just do not know for sure what the church will look like. Not yet. Only time will tell. We could very quickly go back to “business as usual.” Back to the comfort and perceived safety of the way we did things pre-COVID-19. It would be so easy to do just that. But Bishop Curry and Canon Spellers are both quick to add that we have an incredible opportunity moving forward that we should not squander; that we should not, that we cannot, let pass us by. As a result of this time, in the aftermath of this time, we have the opportunity to make the Church what we want it to be. We have the opportunity to make the Church what it needs to be to meet the needs of a post-COVID-19 society. Dare I say, we have the opportunity to make the Church more of what God intends it to be.

Again, our church leaders had no magic answers as to what that will look like. The reality is, we cannot know until we start to move into that future. We will have to “build the plane while we’re flying it.” And the reality is, what the future of the church looks like is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. One of the things we have learned during this time of diaspora is that every congregation is different and therefore must approach its needs in differing ways. The way we do things is not like St. Thomas of Canterbury or St. Luke’s. No, what the church looks like moving forward—should we have the courage and the foresight to embrace the opportunities available to us—is going to be different for each congregation.

I know that some of you are probably skeptical, even fearful. Skeptical about what things will look like, fearful that what makes St. Gregory’s the place you love might be somehow lost. But I don’t see that has to be the case. As Canon Spellers noted, what we have done in this short time has revealed gifts of incredible flexibility, creativity, and resilience. We have the opportunity to incorporate these gifts into what is the best of St. Gregory’s and to birth an even better St. Gregory’s in the future. I see a St. Gregory’s that is more flexible in providing different

worship opportunities while still holding on to the rich liturgical and theological traditions that are the foundation of our Anglican identity. I see a St. Gregory's that is more flexible and better able to meet the pastoral needs of all our parishioners, both those who embrace technology and those who are "low tech" or even "no tech." I see a St. Gregory's that is better positioned to meet the needs of our ever expanding virtual community, both at 6201 East Willow Street and those who are coming to us in online worship, as we further live into and expand the culture of hospitality that is foundational to who we have always been as a parish.

While our clergy conference and the discussion we engaged in were not planned in coordination with or even in reference to the readings for today, the context of this Gospel reading is not so different from where we find ourselves 2,000 years later. Our Gospel is the first portion of Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Where he reveals and explains to his disciples what is about to happen – his death—and the significance of his departure. Recognizing that their world will be dramatically changed by his death, Jesus explains things in such a way that when it does occur, the disciples will be able to see these events through the eyes of faith and not despair. And he does it in such a way that prepares them for the life that they will lead during and after his Passion. He covers a lot of ground in the four chapters of his discourse, with many themes. But there are three in particular that helped the disciples get through their difficult time to the other side, that helped the early Church form and ultimately thrive.

First was the assurance of his abiding presence. Jesus assured the disciples that he would continue to be with them. Not physically, but that they would continue to be guided and nourished by what they had learned from him during their three years together.

How this would happen is the second theme: the promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised the disciples that he would send the gift of the Holy Spirit to be a constant companion in their lives and ministries, to support, guide, nurture, and inspire them as they moved into the unknown that lay before them.

Third, and perhaps most important, is the centrality of love. Jesus reminded the disciples that the central theme that runs through everything he did, everything he taught, is love. Love as exemplified in the relationship between Jesus and the Father. The love that he demonstrated just moments before this discourse, when he washed their feet and gave them a new commandment, that they are to love one another as he has loved them (Jn 13.34).

These same principles apply to us as we face the prospect of moving into our unknown future. A future where things will, out of necessity, need to be different from the way they have always been. We have the assurance that Jesus is still with us, abiding with us in the message and work of love that he began. Our job is to continue in that Gospel work. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit to energize us, guide us, and inspire us to think about how we are to faithfully live into our mission and ministry as the church. Our job is to follow the Spirit who leads us where we way not want, or may not have thought, to go.

And most importantly, we are to trust that the core principles of who we are will endure—namely love of God and love of neighbor. Because love is the core. All of this is about how do we cultivate that core? How do we live from that core? The basic things we do—worship, Bible

Study, educational programs, outreach programs—are all about putting us in touch with the core principle of God’s love. Our task is not to hoard that and keep it within our walls. Our task is to go out and live out of that core, to share that core message with the world, whereby we develop deeper relationships with God, with our neighbors, and with ourselves. To journey with others as they, too, develop deeper relationships with God, with their neighbors, and with themselves.

As Bishop Taylor told us at clergy conference, the church’s calling as we move forward will be “to gather what we’ve learned and to match it to what we already know and find some way to ensure that Christ’s church is livelier and stronger.” While he put it in different words, his charge to us is no different than Jesus’ charge to his disciples in his Farewell Discourse. And thankfully, we have the same gifts and resources the disciples had 2,000 years ago to guide us now. The same gifts and resources that have sustained the Church these last two millennia.

In these uncertain times, as we stand poised to move into an unknown future, we echo Thomas’ statement, “Lord, we do not know where we are going. How can we know the way?” And while we do not know what the outcome will be, what the church will look like, we do indeed know the way. Jesus has given us that. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14.6). And as he then told the disciples, so he says to us: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (Jn 14.12). The only question is, do we have the faith and the courage to live into that promise?

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!