

Sunday, May 7, 2023
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/656876815811917>

(Sermon begins at about 18:30)

“The Way, the Truth, and the Life”

As I noted last week, in this latter half of the Easter season we turn our attention from Christ’s initial post-resurrection appearances to his disciples to the ongoing implications of what his resurrection means in the lives of his followers. We have moved from the immediate impact the resurrection had on the disciples in the further development of their lives of faith to what the resurrection means in sustaining our own lives of faith. We do this by stepping back and looking at some of the key teachings Jesus made prior to his death and resurrection. Teachings that, in light of the resurrection, take on new meaning, new significance.

The Gospel reading for today contains a teaching that, in many ways, represents a transition point—for Jesus, for his disciples, and for us. This portion of John’s Gospel is the beginning of what is often referred to as the Farewell Discourse: Jesus’ final words—his final instructions, if you will—to his disciples on what we know as Maundy Thursday. This is a critical point of transition for Jesus in that in mere hours, he will be arrested, put on trial, found guilty of blasphemy and sedition, sentenced to death, and executed by crucifixion. This is the beginning of his transition from life to death. The final opportunity to wrap up three years of his public ministry, and to pass the mantle to his disciples. This would be the last opportunity to prepare them for what is to come: life without him—at least physically.

Which makes this a transition point for the disciples, as well. A transition from the life they had experienced over the last three years as they followed Jesus to a life without him. Given all that Jesus has told them up to this point—that he will be leaving them; that he will be betrayed by one of their own; that Peter, his chief lieutenant, will deny him not once but three times—the disciples were undoubtedly and understandably confused and uncertain. Confused about how any of this could even be possible. Not just the seeming impossibility that his own would betray and deny him, but even more so that the one whom they came to recognize as the Messiah could possibly be put to death. That’s not how it’s supposed to happen. And yet, if true—after all, why would Jesus tell them this if it weren’t true, if it was not going to actually play out that way—what would this mean for them? What would happen to them? What would they do without him?

Thomas gives voice to the confusion and uncertainty that surely all the disciples are experiencing in the moment, and which we at times experience in our own lives of faith: “How can we know the way?” There is so much contained in that simple question. Who will guide us? How do we know where to go? How will we know what to do? With a huge, unstated “No, this can’t be. We’re not ready. We’re not prepared for this.”

Jesus responds with “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Again, so much within those simple words. Jesus is essentially saying, “But you do know the way. We’ve been traveling the way together for these last three years. You’ve been with me, watching me, working with me, learning all that I had to teach you. Learning the truth of who I am. Learning the truth of who God is. Learning the truth of who you are as beloved children of God. As we have traveled the way and learned the truth of what life in God and God’s service can and does mean. Preparing you for how to continue in the way, to share truth, to live the life God has given you. Preparing you to continue with my ministry, with your ministry. As you continue on that way, as you continue in that truth, as you continue in that life, I will continue to be with you.”

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” These are Jesus’ words of comfort to his disciples. Assuring them that he will continue to be with them as they transition into the next phase of their journey. As they continue to grow into the fullness of who they are called to be. That if they are faithful to the way he showed them, if they are faithful to the truth he taught them, if they are faithful in living as he showed them, he will be with them. Throughout their transition, throughout their lives of faith, throughout their ministries, he will be with them, guiding and supporting them. But he won’t just be with them, he will be a part of them.

Those same words of comfort apply equally to us. For in our lives of faith, we continually seek to walk in Jesus’s ways, to learn and follow the truth he taught, and to participate in the life he has prepared for us. This is the meaning of the promised eternal life that is a result of Christ’s resurrection. That we are brought into the fullness of life and relationship with God. That we are given eternal life with him. A new life that does not begin with death, but that we participate in even now.

Admittedly, eternal life is something that we think of as awaiting us when we die. Understandable, given the first part of Jesus’ words to his disciples in today’s Gospel, where he talks about preparing a place for us in God’s heavenly realm: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” In my experience, this is by far the most popular Gospel passage for funerals. Yet another transition inherent in today’s Gospel: our own transition out of this mortal life. From life to death to our new and eternal life, as we often think of it. The popularity of this passage likely due to the comfort and assurance it provides, that this mortal life is not the end. That there is more beyond this. That Jesus assures us that there is more. That Jesus assures us of our place—our eternal place—with him and with God.

Which is certainly true. There is more. But there is a misconception as to when that “more” begins. It does not begin at the time of death. It does not begin with the funeral service, with the commendation or the committal. Rather, the eternal life promised in Christ’s resurrection begins when we are baptized into the life of faith. As our Catechism tells us “The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God’s family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit” (BCP, 858). And as is reaffirmed in the prayer of thanksgiving over the water in preparation for baptism: “Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our

Savior” (BCP, 307). This is perhaps the most important thing to remember about eternal life. That it is not something that we await. It is, rather, something that we are living even now.

Which brings us full circle back to Jesus’ response to Thomas: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” This is the formula—or at least one formula—for what it means to participate in eternal life more fully. Jesus’ words to Thomas and those gathered at the Last Supper were not just meant for those present. They apply equally to us today, to Jesus’ 21st century disciples. Perhaps even more so. After all, Jesus’ original disciples had the benefit of having spent three years with him, observing him, learning from him, being partners in his ministerial work. While he is not physically with us, the promise of the resurrection, and the promise contained in today’s Gospel reading, is that he continues to be with us, nonetheless.

He continues to be our Way, as he walks with us through our day-to-day lives. As he encourages us, supports us, and strengthens us as we carry on his mission and ministry in the world.

He continues to be our Truth, as we embrace and follow his teachings as the foundation for our lives and our ministries. As we experience the truth of who he is. As we experience the truth of who God is. As we live into the truth of who we are as beloved children of God. As we demonstrate the truth of who he is through our own example.

He continues to be our Life as we seek to live more fully into who he calls us to be as his beloved siblings. As we seek to live more fully into what it means to be members of the Body of Christ in the world. As we seek to fully embrace and live into the fullness of eternal life that he has promised and provides for us.

Jesus himself assured us of this in the words he spoke 2,000 years ago to his disciples—to his original disciples, as well as to all disciples who would follow. “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, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

This is Jesus’ invitation to us to fully embrace him as our way, as our truth, as our life, and to live fully into all that that means. The assurance that he is indeed with us every step of the way, just waiting for us to realize the full potential we have as members of the Body of Christ.