

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020

(John 14:1-14)

If there is one notable thing about our Christian faith and what we find among the many chapters and verses of scripture, it's that we're sometimes asked – even expected – to do difficult things. We're asked to love, yes, but that love must also extend to our enemies. When someone hurts us, we're not supposed to seek revenge but rather turn the other cheek. When someone steals from us, we're supposed to offer them more than they've already taken. When someone wrongs us, the forgiveness we offer isn't supposed to be a one-time event.

Depending on the person, doing any one much less all of these even one time is difficult. But doing them again ... and again ... and again? That may seem like reaching for the brass ring that we can never seem to hold on to, or dreaming the impossible dream that can never be reached. We continue to strive for them, though; we continue to struggle; many times we fall down, and just as many times we rise and try again.

In particularly challenging times the difficult things we're asked to do may seem even more onerous. Today's reading from John shows us another one of those challenges, one that seems particularly weighty in this time of physical separation.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Now it's important to put this into a bit of context. These early verses of chapter 14 come just after Jesus has told his disciples at the end of chapter 13 that he was going to place where they could not follow, at least not in the near term. Peter, that stubborn, loyal, loving friend, had asked Jesus why he couldn't follow him – going so far as to say that he would lay down his life for him. In response, Jesus told Peter that he would in fact deny him three times. Now, in today's reading, we find the disciples still wrestling to understand what they were being told. Thomas and Phillip had questions and needs, about where Jesus was going and the request to see the Father.

Fear and uncertainty were in the air, and the disciples are tasked with something that in their moments of trembling and instability had to seem to be an impossible ask. Yet ask Jesus does; he balances their fear with one request: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” In this passage as written he only says it one time, but in my own mind I can hear him saying it throughout ... a whispered reminder to his frightened, unsteady friends who would soon stare into the face of something for which they weren't prepared. Listen to some of these verses again, with those words of hope interjected as whispers.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? And if I go and prepare a place for you, 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.” Do not let your hearts be troubled. Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will

know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Do not let your hearts be troubled. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 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. Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

The disciples were about to go to a place in their lives that they hadn’t expected, and Jesus was reassuring them that he would come back for them so that they too would be where he was. Today, each of us – you and I – are somewhere in life that we hadn’t expected to be. We are afraid. We are unsteady. We are not certain of what’s next. It is into our own frightening time ... it is to each one of us ... that Jesus again speaks those words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

The disciples couldn’t go where they were yearning to go, unable to follow Jesus. For us, in this time, we can’t go where we yearn to be: gathered together again in the same physical place, sitting with one another in the pews and kneeling side-by-side at the altar rail. But the promise of Jesus, the promise that he would come back for the disciples, is the same for us. Much of Jesus’ ministry was going to where the people were: to the margins where the sick and the lonely, the blind and the deaf, the rich and the poor all were experiencing separation – from God, or one another, or a feeling of hope, or a sense of purpose.

Then as now, in our own time of angst and grief-filled separation, Jesus comes to us. Space is not important; place is not important. Every place in the world is holy. Every place in the world is sacred. Every place in the world is a part of creation. Every place in the world is where we can be met and embraced and loved by Christ. Whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father, and the Father through Jesus has seen ... and continues to see ... and will see ... us. No distance can separate us from God; for now, we don’t need to follow Jesus. Jesus comes to us.

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Amen.