

Easter 5 (A)
May 7, 2023
Text: John 14:1-14

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I'd like to invite you to let Jesus speak directly to you through the words of scripture this morning. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." We have been through so much in the last three years. We've endured a global pandemic. We've faced national political upheaval. We've experienced a local crisis with homelessness and more. And that's on top of the burdens we each carry as individuals and families. My goodness, we've had to deal with so much!

That's why I want you to hear Jesus speaking to you. These words were originally for his disciples just a matter of hours before he would be arrested, taken away from them and put to death. So this isn't some "don't worry, be happy" kind of moment. Instead, what we hear from Jesus is his wisdom for living in a confusing, challenging, and sometimes heart-breaking world. And I believe that the Spirit speaks through scripture to address us personally with Jesus' comfort and wisdom.

I wonder whether one of the most important things Jesus does for us is to simply acknowledge the trouble. Yes, there's trouble here, but don't let your hearts be troubled. We live in a society that almost requires us to be relentlessly positive. What's the obligatory response to the greeting, "How you doing?" Fine! Just fine! But there is something healing and liberating in having a safe place to say, "Not fine. Things are hard." Jesus is that safe place where we can bring those burdens, where we can set them down and take time for healing, time to be renewed and refreshed.

But Jesus is more than a therapist who lets us unload our worries on him. He says, "I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus isn't inviting us to imagine waiting until this life is over to experience this place that he prepares, as if it would only be real for us in the life to come. This place of refuge is available to us now. Jesus is, for us now, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The storm can swirl and break around us, but Jesus invites us to put our trust in him. Because, really, life will do what life is going to do, and the things we can control sometimes seem very limited. But we can commit ourselves to Jesus, we can abide with him, and experience him as the Way, the Truth and the Life—the Way through the storm, the Truth about living humanely in the storm, the Life that is peace, even in the heart of the storm.

Let me tell you a story about how Jesus is the Way. Jim was a friend of mine when I lived in a small town in southeastern New Mexico. He was an independent construction contractor, and he discovered that in the construction business in town, there was a very strong good old boy network. The network let it be known that anyone who did work of any kind was expected to make a kickback payment to the primary contractor. Jim tried to convince others that, not only was it illegal, but it was also unchristian (in a community that prided itself on being part of the Bible belt). So, Jim ended up getting blackballed by the all the good old boys. He ended up declaring bankruptcy and moving his business to another state. But what impressed me most

about Jim was how he trusted Jesus and stuck to Jesus' way of forgiveness, Jesus' way of non-retaliation and refusing revenge. Jim did not nurse his anger or hold a grudge. Instead, he tried to make Jesus' way his way. I know Jim had his moments, but I was amazed by his patience and level-headedness, his lack of bitterness, and especially by the sense of peace about his life. For Jim, Jesus was the Way through the storm.

Jesus is the Truth. I have a dear old friend in California who works with kids, and she's really good at what she does. Pat has a lively sense of humor and an infectious laugh. She's fun to be with. But the thing that I think makes her so effective in her work is that she embodies the core truth of Jesus' work: every person is loved by God, and we are all connected. Every human being—young or old—is a child of God, precious in God's sight. You can see it when she talks with someone, she gives them her full attention. She's not checking her phone. She's not multi-tasking or thinking ahead to the next thing on her list. Instead, she's there. She's fully present, because this child who is needing her attention is a child of God. I know it's not easy, how she makes space like that, because sometimes working with kids can feel truly chaotic. But she embodies Jesus' Truth about compassion and love. She lives out of Jesus' vision that we belong to each other, and our lives only make sense when we're connected to each other and care for each other, and that is how we live with God. For Pat, Jesus is the Truth about what a genuinely human life looks like.

Jesus is the Life. My last story is about my mom. It's almost three years ago now that she found out she had a brain tumor. It was inoperable, although there were some possible treatment options. She was very clear about what she would allow the doctors to do and not do. But mostly she was at peace. She said she was ready. She was thankful for the life God had given her, with a wonderful husband and two kids she loved dearly. She was thankful for the opportunities God had given her to serve others as a follower of Jesus. She was at peace with whatever might be because Jesus was her life, now and in the life to come. I was thankful for good, compassionate hospice care and medications that managed her pain. I was thankful for old friends who came to visit. And most of all, I was thankful that I could share at least part of that journey with her. Even as her body was giving out, she was so alive, because Jesus was her life, the source of her peace. She found that place of refuge with Jesus in the very eye of the storm, and it was enough. Jesus is the Life.

So do not let your hearts be troubled. Life has enough trouble already. The way of peace and hope and strength is with Jesus. It's not a way to peace and hope and strength only sometime in the future, because Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life now, and he prepares a place for us. Even if we experience that place that Jesus prepares for us only partially, only incompletely, even if we have to work really hard sometimes to not be gripped by the fear, to let go of the worry or anger, that place Jesus prepares is always ready for us, a place where God makes a home in us, and we are at home in God. The troubles of the world and the troubles of our lives will be what they will be. Yet Jesus is our Way through them. Jesus is our Truth about how to live in the meantime. And Jesus is our Life, both now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.