

Promise

John 14:1-14

I think there's supposed to be a strange circular logic to our Lectionary that brings up this text from the Gospel of John today. The reading we just heard comes from the 14th Chapter of John, in what is often called "The Farewell Discourse" of Jesus. We've backtracked in a narrative sense from some of the post-resurrection accounts we heard in the first weeks of Easter. This story today takes place on Maundy Thursday. Just after Jesus washes his disciples feet, and gives them the new commandment that they love one another as he has loved them, we then find this scene. It's weird in the middle of Easter to be back in the midst of Holy Week. But I think it was the intention of those who curated the Lectionary that we have a chance to revisit that fateful night of betrayal, and see this scene with new eyes, and hear Christ's promises with new ears. What is Maundy Thursday and the eventual betrayal in the garden when you hear it in the full knowledge of Easter morning? We're meant to hear this farewell that gives way to a deep night of fear as Easter people. We're meant to hear this story with our eye on the ending, with the **hope** of resurrection burning within us.

But this year is different, isn't it? To be honest, I found myself really annoyed with this lesson this week. Jesus begins by saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me," and to be blunt, I don't connect with that at all... Really Jesus? "Do not let your hearts be troubled?" That's all you've got? In the face of *this*? I resonate much more with Thomas' question that follows, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thomas' question admits that he's scared. I mean, Jesus you keep talking about your betrayal, and Jerusalem is occupied by the Romans, and you've been been drawing a lot of attention especially with that stunt in the temple with the money changers, and Judas just left the dinner when you were talking about betrayers, and you've been saying stuff lately about taking up my cross like those criminals we passed on the road on the way in, and I didn't think following you was going to be like this, and Jesus I'm scared.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." Jesus, my heart **is** troubled. Jesus, I'm scared. Frankly, Lord, it doesn't feel like there's an Easter lens on this Maundy Thursday story at all. Like Thomas I'm scared. I'm scared to go to the store, I'm scared to touch a gas pump, I'm scared to get near someone for fear I could be an asymptomatic carrier or they could, I'm scared for friends at a distance, I'm scared for those I may never see again. I'm scared. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

What even is the way forward from all of this? It just feels like things will never get back to normal, and folks are saying that even "normal" won't be normal... There's all this talk of reopening, but there's still new COVID-19 cases. It's not safe yet. Should things resume, or am I just bored and restless? And what does a path back look like? How can we know the way? Jesus says he's leading, Jesus says he's with us, but when I'm so caught up in my own fear and self-preservation, it's so hard to see him.

Lord, we do not know where you are going.... How can we know the way?

I think we really are meant to read this story with our mind on Easter. When our minds are caught up in the same fear as the disciples, it's really easy to miss the point. It's easy to forget that this passage, as theologians

have titled it for a long time, is the *farewell discourse*. Jesus is teaching his followers, in the hours before his own death, how to say goodbye.

When resurrection is our way of life, there are going to be many opportunities to face our fears and say goodbye. As Christians, that's something we need to practice. There is always going to be death before resurrection. God is making all things new, but loss of *something* is the inevitable beginning to new life. Whether it's our sense of false security, or our best laid plans, or systems in which we thought we could trust, or whether it's someone we love dearly... we need to learn, in faith, how to say Goodbye.

Because, when Jesus is teaching us about how to say goodbye, he's really teaching us about grace. Grace is a **promise** from a God who loves us dearly. Grace is a **promise** from a God who has prepared a way of salvation for us, who has prepared a place for us to abide, to dwell, in God's peace. Grace is the **promise** that lies all along the way of the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. Grace is the **promise** of the one who reveals God our Creator by his presence. Grace is a **promise** from one who has done great works so that our salvation may not be bound to works so that we might try to save ourselves. This **promise** of love eternal is meant to dismantle our fears and worries that are fruits of the systems we've built for ourselves that lie to us and say that we are lacking, that we aren't doing enough, that we aren't worthy, that our neighbor is less than us, that we are wholly unloved. This **promise** is not meant to be a litmus test or checklist at the high gates of an impenetrable heaven, but the wide open promise that salvation can be known in the midst of the earth, and that our fears and sins are all that is holding us back from seeing God's kingdom here and now in amazing ways. It's the **promise** that was first shared on Easter morning that God was, is, and always will be rolling away the stones that shut our tombs tight, so that we might see a new way, walk in a new hope, sing a new song, and trust that God's love will always have the last word. This **promise** is that even when we are scared, and we don't know the way, The Way walks alongside us in love. The way that Jesus says Goodbye to his followers is not rooted in expectations and disappointments and rebukes and rules and laws and duties and obligations... it is rooted in **PROMISE**. It's rooted in **grace**.

Jesus, we're scared... We do not know where you are going.... How can we know the way?

Even as we ask these questions, confess these fears, and struggle to find the way forward in these troubled times, The Way is with us, speaking a promise rooted in grace that he is risen. The Way is with us, teaching us how to say Goodbye to what was, that we may walk in new life now. When all we can see is the gloom of Maundy Thursday, the way is speaking through the night that we may know grace in the dawn. We're called to say Goodbye.

We are called to say goodbye to a system of works righteousness that hangs over us like shackles and orients our lives toward fear and not toward hope. We live under a lie that we can save ourselves from whatever mess we're in, pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and be our own redeemer. But that's a lie. *We need each other*. This season of physical distancing has revealed again and again how much we need one another, and how woefully helpless we are alone, and how strong we are in unity. As disciples, we are called to obey, love, serve, and work, but at the same time that we are called to say goodbye to any notion that those things save us.

Those things reveal the Kingdom of God here on Earth—a beloved community united in promise and love—and we are being sent to reveal that way of hope in unity to our world.

We are called to say good bye to our old selves, to be changed by this experience of God. As Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” This is meant to make us a changed people who are **willing to change** to meet the deep needs of this world. People like Ahmaud Arbery—who was killed in February in Georgia for the “crime” of jogging while black in America—need us to change. Systems of racism and white supremacy that took this young man’s life, and denied him justice for 74 days until there was enough public outcry, exist in this nation. And our faith in the God who’s love is poured out for all people demands that we examine ourselves, our complicity, and then say goodbye to what we find. Our siblings of color in this nation need folks who claim to be rooted in grace to say goodbye, and walk in a new resurrection way that reveals God’s deep love for all people, and God’s deep delight in the beauty of our diversity. There are plenty of sinful systems in our world that deal death, fear, and pain daily, and it is our calling as followers of Christ to leave those things in the tomb, to build a new way of abundant life for **all** people. When we experience resurrection, there is no going back to the ways of death from before.

We are called to say goodbye to our old assumptions and plans. I’m sure it seems like we’ve done far too much of that lately, but have we really let go? Saying Goodbye means discerning God’s will for our future, and how we are to join in the mission of God here on earth, in THIS community, reconciling all people to the love of their creator. This will look different than the way of fear we knew before.

And, yes, we are called to say goodbye to the faithful among us. We do this with trust as well. This story is often used as a funeral text, not as a *wish* that the person we’re remembering “Got in” to heaven... but it is shared because it is a story rooted in the **promise** of God’s abundant grace. Trusting in Grace, trusting in the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ our Lord, we *can* say goodbye to one another in faith, as we continue our pilgrimage on earth. We celebrate the lives of the saints, trust that God keeps God’s promises, and look forward to the day when we are united again in the fullness of God’s mercy.

God’s promises, as we’ve shared many times through our this season, do not make the pain and dangers we’re experiencing magically go away. But these grace filled promises speak in such a way that our pain and fear will never get the last word. In the midst of what we’re feeling, I pray that we allow Jesus to speak these promises into our lives in ways that allow us to know and trust in the Way to truth and life that brings hope in the midst of our pain.

Jesus we’re scared. We do not know where you are going, We do not know the way. And so we say goodbye... to fear... to sin... to our best laid plans... to our expectations... to our death dealing systems... and to one another. We say Goodbye, together, in a sure and abiding confidence in the **promises** of Christ who is The Way, The Truth, The Life. This promise is what will guide us through the gloom of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and let us stride boldly into the new Easter dawn.

Amen.