

A Sermon by the Reverend Mother Crystal J. C. Hardin  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A)  
Sunday, May 10, 2020

Acts 7:55-60  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
John 14:1-14

This morning, we are treated to a small part of what is commonly referred to as “the farewell discourse” in the Gospel of John. Context is always important, and it is especially important here. The cross is looming and the time has come for last words and last things.

Jesus draws those around him close, those faithful disciples who have struggled, followed, loved, risked, lived with Jesus. He draws them close, knowing that he is going to be arrested and put to death, and he says to them, in a number of different ways: Soon I won’t be with you anymore. Soon you’ll look for me, but won’t see me. Soon you’ll reach for me, but won’t find me. Not in the ways that you’ve come to expect.

He seems to say, soon you may be angry. Disappointed. Confused. Discouraged. Isolated. Disbelieving. Afraid. Despairing. Hopeless.

Soon, you will grieve.

Jesus seems to acknowledge all of this – the complexity of emotions that will stir in the disciple’s hearts, minds, and bodies (that are, already stirring) – acknowledging those realities and speaking to them a word of comfort, hope, and certainty:

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” (John 14:1)

The disciples’ responses to all of this are where I’d like to focus for a moment. Jesus’ words raise questions. His directive, “Let not your hearts be troubled,” made in no uncertain terms, does not, as it turns out, instantly un-trouble any hearts.

If we look back just a few verses before where this morning’s Gospel begins, we get Simon Peter asking, “Lord, where are you going and can I come?”

And Jesus says, “Where I am going you cannot follow.”

But, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

Thomas, dear Thomas, then speaks up, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”

And Jesus says, “You know the way. I am the way.”

And Phillip, not long after, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.”

And Jesus says, “You have seen the father, I am in him and he is in me.”

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe me.

This week, I spoke to my spiritual director who shared with me something that she heard in a recent sermon. She said the preacher spoke of our present internal and spiritual situation as a “withdrawal from the myth of certainty.”<sup>1</sup> I found that terminology to be quite striking.

Withdrawal suggests a physical and mental reaction, a symptom of a negative reliance on something with the capacity to overwhelm our otherwise rational wills. It evidences a bodily craving and is, somehow, a reminder that we are physical creatures with limitations.

And, certainty. I’ve come back to that word again and again as a priest and as a person living through these uncertain times. What can we be certain of when there is a virus we cannot see, when the numbers are in flux, when the dates of reopening and returning to some of what is normal keep being pushed back? When we cannot know for certain what the next six months will look like? What can we be certain of in uncertain times?

In the very early days of this pandemic, I was speaking with one of you. We were talking about this very thing – not knowing what was in store for the next few months. And, as so often happens in these conversations, I found myself on the receiving end of a very astute and deeply faithful observation: “Well,” my conversation partner said, “we don’t ever really know what the future holds for us. Do we? We think we know. We want to believe we know. But, we don’t know what will happen, even tomorrow, even in so-called normal times.”

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<sup>1</sup> This characterization appears to have originated with writer Ashley C. Ford.

The myth of certainty. It is only a myth, after all. Times like these pull back the curtain, so to speak, give us a glimpse of the truth. And, yet, we are desperate to shore up what we know, to get more information, to put our anxieties to rest, to predict and to plan and to plead.

Where are you going and can I come?  
How do I know the way?  
Can I see? Can you show me more?

Thomas Merton's, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, is a collection of early monastic stories. There is one story in particular that I'd like to share. It goes like this:

*Some elders once came to Abbot Anthony, and there was with them also Abbot Joseph. Wishing to test them, Abbot Anthony brought the conversation around to Holy Scriptures. And he began from the youngest to ask them the meaning of this or that text. Each one replied as best he could, but Abbot Anthony said to them: 'You have not got it yet.' After them all he asked Abbot Joseph: 'What about you? What do you say the text means?' Abbot Joseph replied: "I know not." Then Abbot Anthony said, "Truly Abbot Joseph alone has found the way, for he replies that he knows not."<sup>2</sup>*

That is the truth of it, isn't it: We know not. We want to know. We need to know. But, we know not.

Like Peter, Thomas, and Philip, we issue our questions and seek a certainty that makes sense to us – one that we can use to plan and to act. We are, after all, only human. And planning and acting is necessary in this world. And yet, what we crave, what we long for, the source and substance of our true craving, is something else entirely. It is for the presence and healing love of God found in Jesus Christ himself, pure, spiritual milk.

Jesus who knows our human failings and limitations. Jesus who foresees our grief, who tolerates our questions, who loves us to the end. Jesus who first goes to prepare a place for us and then will return, taking us by the hand, so that where he is we may be also.

We are invited in our uncertainty to look and to seek in ways we might not have before. To notice how God is always doing a new thing. To recognize how our need for certainty, our sometimes too swift reactions to uncertain situations, can cause us

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, "The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings of the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century" (New Directions, 1970), LXXXVIII.

to overlook the many ways God meets us in the in between, in the not yet, in the not now. What can feel like chaos to us can be the raw ingredients of God's creating.

Friends, it remains Easter. And yet we are this morning reminded of Jesus' farewell discourse. Of last words. Last things. Because even where the resurrection truth is known and celebrated, our lives are still marked by human limitation and fragility. We, a people who know not, will always seek to know it all. But, here is the good news. By the Grace of God, we follow a Jesus who knows all and asks only that we know him.

Amen.