

Easter 5

John 14:1-16

5/10/2020

Sermon by The Rev. Lex Breckinridge

Let me get right to the point. We are all suffering right now. Everyone of us, each in our own way – we are all suffering. If you're not acknowledging your suffering right now, well, just look around you. Here's as good a definition of suffering as I know. Anytime you're not in control, you're suffering. That sure rings true for me. Without my usual schedule, without the structure of the daily life I've become accustomed to, without being able to see my children and grandchildren and friends and you, without knowing how this is all going to end – which is another way of talking about control – well, my dear friends, I'm suffering. How about you?

The worst thing I could do for you right now is to offer you fake assurances, or empty words of security. You would eventually see right through all of that and it would just make the suffering worse. So I won't do that. But you know what? You don't have to count on anything I might say right now. You can, instead, count on Jesus. He has some words of comfort, some words of assurance, some words of hope for us. And we can rely on these words because, paradoxically, they don't come from a place of power and control and privilege, the places I'm most comfortable living. No, Jesus' words of comfort and hope are just that because they come from a place of vulnerability and his words are spoken to his friends who are in the most vulnerable place they have ever been in their lives.

Our text this morning, just like last week's and next week's, comes from a long goodbye talk Jesus is giving to his closest friends the night before his arrest and trial and certain execution. He knows where this is all headed and so he's telling them goodbye. But even as he's saying goodbye, he's telling them he's preparing a new place for them, a place where they'll be with him again and – here's the real surprise – a place they already know how to get to. That causes Thomas to ask a really good question: "We don't know where you're going; how can we know the way?" Now, if that was a good question on that long ago night, well, it's a *really* good question today. "Lord, I don't even know where you're going. How in the hell am I supposed to know the way?" That's my question, I'll tell you. How am I supposed to know the way?

Well, for one thing, Jesus isn't offering his friends – and that includes you and me – a Google Map or a set of very clear written directions. And that's because he's not printing the way towards a physical location. He's talking about himself. See through his long goodbye, he uses different images to show his friends just what it is they have been following. All of these images begin with "I am." Last Sunday we heard him say, "I am the gate," the gate to the sheep pen where the sheep can shelter in safety. He goes on to say, "I am the good shepherd," the one who calls the sheep by name, searches for them when they're lost, and then leads them safely home. Today we hear, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." In the chapter that follows, the one we read this morning, we'll hear him say, "I am the true vine and my father is the vine grower" and then "I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me and I abide in you."

All these images – of sheep pens and shepherds, of many dwelling places, of the Way, the Truth, the Life, of a vine with many branches, all of these “I am” images are invitations to safety and comfort and consolation without offering any kind of phony sense of security, or false assurance that every thing is going to get fixed and returned to normal. These “I am” images in fact are invitations to us to let go of our need to control all the outcomes and simply rest with Jesus, *abide* with Jesus.

In the midst of intense grief and loss these are images that offer the hope that grief is not the end of the story. But notice, now, that Jesus never says “O, you don’t need to grieve.” He never says that. In fact, Jesus realizes that grief is necessary to unlock the heart. To open the heart in the most vulnerable way so that Love can enter.

This morning’s gospel reading is one of the readings the Book of Common Prayer suggests for funerals. In all my years of ordained ministry it is by far and away the one families most often select. You know, funerals really aren’t for the dead. Funerals are really for the living. The living come together at the funeral or memorial service to do the work of grieving so they can go on living. And somehow, the assurance in this reading that there are many dwelling places, many mansions, as the old King James version has it, in the Father’s house, that have been prepared not just for the loved one but for those grieving the loved one, resonates very powerfully. And for the living, the dwelling, the abiding, happens now. It happens because grief has the power to open the heart to love, if we allow it. The suffering that grief brings often comes from all kinds of control wants that can’t be met, like regret over things done or left undone, or longing to be in the loved one’s presence, or sadness that the times of beauty and warmth and love that were once shared won’t be happening again. All of that loss is an expression of love. And the truth is that the love hasn’t died. It’s just taken on a new dimension.

So grief can lead us to love and to love fiercely and generously. Grief reminds us of the reality of the shortness of this life. The way forward through grief and in the midst of grief, grief that in many cases lasts for the rest of our lives, is love. Fierce love. Generous love.

“I am,” Jesus says. “I am The Way, The Truth, The Life.” Follow me to the Father. Live my Way of Love. Live and speak my Truth. Take hold of my life and make it your life. Now. Today. In the midst of all the suffering and the grief and the loss. Let go of what you can’t control and find the path forward from suffering.

I ran across a beautiful essay yesterday by Sabrina Mark. She’s a poet and an academic who studies and writes about fairy tales. She’s long desired to be on a university faculty. In February she spent three days interviewing for just such a position at a university. During these days, she began to question the worth, the value, for her, of such a role. Her long-held dream was now seeming to be empty, then came pandemic. She’s at home now with her husband and their two young sons. Instead of being a teacher of creative writing in a university, she’s now a homeschool teacher of two elementary-school age, high-energy boys. As she reflects on the loss of her dream career, she’s also reflecting on the life she has in this very moment. Running out of homeschooling ideas, she has just sent her boys on a scavenger hunt.

*“I wanted an office with a number,” she says. “I wanted a university ID. I wanted access to a fancy library and benefits and students and colleagues and travel money. I wanted the whole stupid kingdom.” She picks up the phone and calls her mother. She repeats her lament. “And then what?” says*

*my mother. "And then nothing," I say as I jump off the very top of the fairy tale that has no place for me. "You're better off," says my mother. I look around. I've landed where I am."*

And where she is, what she describes, where she's landed, is the kingdom of Love. Letting go of control, being vulnerable to the suffering that comes along with all our control needs, cracks open the heart to Love.

So this is where we've landed. All of us. We can continue to try to control the outcome which means we can continue to suffer. Or we can be present in this moment, in this hour, in this day, in this month, in this year to something new. Yes, old dreams may be lost. But something new is being born. The Way, the Truth, the Life is right here, right where we've landed. And, yes, there is a voice that you can hear if only you'll listen. And the voice is saying, "I am."