

A Easter 5 5.10.20

John 14:1-14

Focus Statement: Jesus is with us.

On Friday I ran 2.23 miles in honor of Ahmaud Arbery, the African American man who was shot in February while jogging because he quote “looked like” someone who had been seen breaking into houses in the neighborhood. Friday would have been his twenty-sixth birthday. Instead, two months after his death, Friday marked the day that charges were brought against the two men who shot him. So on Friday I did my normal workout, so I would be tired and able to focus. Then I ran the additional 2.23 miles in circles around the park by my house, thinking about this shooting, about our text for this weekend, and about how we read this text in the midst of the world we live in.

Our reading for this morning started with Jesus saying to his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Do not let your hearts be troubled. I don’t know about you, but I find my heart is troubled a lot these days. I’m troubled by the death of Arbery, and by the fact that his is not the only name I can rattle off, far from it, of someone who was killed for looking like someone who might have committed a crime. I’m troubled that assault weapons are allowed in our state building, but poster board signs are considered too much of a threat. I’m troubled that in the midst of a global pandemic some people are clamoring to go back to work because to be without work means to be without health care, while others are so enraged at the imposition of wearing a mask that they will shoot the clerk who asked them to. I’m troubled.

I'm troubled, and so on first read I struggle with this command of Jesus for the disciples to not let their "hearts be troubled." Because that's what it is, a command. And there is, after all, much for the disciples to be troubled about. After three years of Jesus talking about how his hour had not yet come, suddenly he'd switched his tone and now it's all, "my hour has come" and "now my soul is troubled." They had gathered that night for a meal, a joyful time with friends before the Passover, but Jesus first had washed their feet, then predicted one of them would betray him, leading to Judas' departure. Then he'd told Peter that he would deny him, and now this message not to let their hearts be troubled. Jesus, our hearts had been troubled since we came back here to watch you raise Lazarus, and things are going from bad to worse, are we just to push aside these very real fears?

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus said, but he did not stop there. He followed this up with two additional commands. "Believe in God, believe also in me." On Palm Sunday we talked about the literary technique common in Hebrew poetry to say something, and then say the thing again with more detail to explain it. The example being the verse from the prophet Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." We talked about how Zechariah was not implying the king was riding on two animals, the reference to the colt was further clarifying the age of the donkey. Fun grammar fact I learned this week, this is what's called an appositive, which means a noun or pronoun that identifies or explains the first noun. Why am I sharing this with you other than fun with English grammar? Because the entire first verse of John chapter fourteen is an appositive phrase. We cannot understand what it means when Jesus says, "do not let your hearts be troubled," without the additional information,

“believe in God, believe also in me.” “Believe in God, believe also in me” is what makes “do not let your hearts be troubled” possible.

What do I mean? The central message of Jesus in John’s Gospel is that he and the Father are one. And because Jesus and the Father are one, the disciples can trust that everything that is about to occur, the betrayal, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus is not the failure of the mission, but in fact the triumph of the mission, the culmination of the work which God through Jesus came to earth to do.

It is because of this promise, that Jesus and the Father are one, that Jesus goes to prepare a place for us in the Father’s own heart, that Jesus returned—that’s key too, notice Jesus said “will return” but I’m saying returned, because this was spoken by the pre-resurrection Jesus, but we read it with the knowledge of the resurrection, so we know already of the truth of these words, the fulfillment of the promise of his return—that Jesus returned to take us to himself, so that where he is—in relationship with the Father—where he is that we may be also. “And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

If you’re confused where this is all going right now, don’t worry, you’re in good company. Thomas too at this point is like, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Bringing us to our second appositive phrase of the passage, “Jesus said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life.’” “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Truth and life are meant to clarify for us what Jesus means when he calls himself the way. Truth – through Jesus, the Word made flesh, the truth of God is present in the world. What was

once an abstract concept is now standing among us, available to see, to hear, to touch, to know. And life – in Jesus the promise of the life-giving, life- sustaining, power of God is accessible. Truth and life are what is meant by Jesus as “the way.” The way is not a road or direction, it is not a path to follow or a set of instructions. The way is relationship with God. The way is Jesus, because in knowing Jesus we know all that God has promised.

This text has the same expansiveness as Jesus’ pronouncement from last week that he is the gate. What we humans try to make so small, Jesus is the gate, and you can’t come in. Jesus is the way, we get to God and you do not, Jesus makes vast. This passage has no comment on the inness or outness of others, it is solely concerned with this promise of relationship of those who have been called out. You who have been left out of the promise, Jesus says, I am the way in, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. You are in because of me, because of what I said, who I am, what I am about to do. You now the way, because the way isn’t about what you know, but that I know you. You do not need to see the Father, because I see you, and if I see you, then you are seen and known by the Father also.

All of this is what gives “do not let your hearts be troubled” it’s robustness, it is what makes “do not let your hearts be troubled” possible. In all that followed we come to see that not having troubled hearts is not about not having feelings. It’s not about not being sad or scared or mad. Not letting our hearts be troubled is about not being paralyzed by those feelings. It is about being sad, scared, angry, alone, all the complexities of the human experience, and still knowing that God is in the midst of this world and is drawing all people to Godself, just like Jesus promised. So here is where I found hope this week. Here

is where I found courage this week. Here is where I saw God in our midst, reminding me of this promise that the things of this world do not have the staying power of the promise of God. In the Sikh tradition, men are not allowed to cut their beards. But the N-95 masks which medical providers are required to wear while treating COVID-19 patients don't fit properly if the wearer has facial hair. So in Canada, two Sikh doctors did just that, shaving off this symbol of their faith so that they could continue to serve their patients. Friends, that's faith. It is about being sad, being scared, being angry, afraid, alone, and standing up and moving forward anyway. It is staying home, even though it's uncomfortable. Or going out and running errands for vulnerable friends or neighbors. It is wearing a mask if you are able, and not judging those who cannot. Above all, it is about trusting that whatever we do and whoever we are, God has it, and God has us, and nothing can change that.

And here's the other blaring good news in this passage, verse twelve, "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." What this means, dear people of God, is that the work that we do matters. It feels so small the things we are called to right now. Staying home, running errands, wearing a mask, ordering take-out. These things are nothing. And yet, this verse promises that they are everything. That they are the hands and feet, the heart and voice of God in our midst. So do not be troubled, dear people of God. Be sad, be scared, be angry. But don't be troubled. Thanks be to God. Amen.