

**5 Easter
May 7, 2023**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

Sermon by Rev. Renee LiaBraaten

As usual, I have a couple questions to get us warmed up:

1. When you go to visit someone for a couple days, and you arrive at their home and sit down to a delicious meal that has been prepared for you, and you settle into a cozy bedroom that is all ready for you, how do you feel?
2. What things are “troubling your heart” these days?

Before we dive into discussing our Gospel lesson for today, there are a couple things we need to note. First, even though it’s the Fifth Sunday after Easter, the conversation we just heard between Jesus and his disciples took place before Easter, on the night Jesus was betrayed, at the last supper. It is part of what Biblical scholars refer to as Jesus’ Farewell Discourse—his final words to his disciples before his death. And we will hear a bit more of this conversation in our gospel lesson next Sunday.

The second thing to note is that this passage contains one of the most beloved and most misunderstood statements of Jesus: ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”***

Unfortunately, these words of Jesus have often been taken out of context and distorted to mean that if you are not a Christian, you are damned. Even though this is a total misinterpretation of what Jesus meant, this “dogma of exclusion” has prevailed and has led to horrible atrocities done in the name of Christianity over the centuries. So, this morning, let’s take a look at what Jesus was actually trying to communicate to his disciples on that last night.

To begin, I’d like to share a poem by the Austrian poet and novelist, Rainer Maria Rilke. This poem is from his Book of Hours and it is one of his love poems to God. But I’ve always felt that it more of a love poem from God to us. It’s about God speaking to us when he first creates us, right before we begin our physical life on earth. As I read it for you now, I’m going to repeat a few of the lines so the words have a little more time to resonate within you. But in the back of the church, there are copies of this poem for you to take home. I hope you will give these words of Rilke many more opportunities to speak to your heart.

**God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.**

**These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.**

**Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.**

**Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.**

Don't let yourself lose me.

**Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.**

This gift called life can get very serious, can't it? The longer Rev. Jerry and I are at St. Cyprian's, the more we learn about the seriousness of your lives, and the more you learn about the seriousness of ours.

We have all lost loved ones and traveled through the barren landscape of grief, haven't we? Some of you have suffered the devastating loss of a child or a grandchild.

And it isn't just death that makes this life so serious. We get sick. We can be diagnosed with horrible diseases like cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes and Parkinson's. And we have learned how global pandemics can bring everything to a screeching halt.

There is addiction, mental illness and broken, abusive relationships.

There's climate change, political polarization, banks failing and escalating deaths due to gun violence.

There are global threats from China, Russia and North Korea, and horrific wars raging even as we sit here in this peace-filled sanctuary.

We could go on and on with all the serious things that "trouble our hearts." And even if we are doing ok right now, we know that life is unpredictable, and things can change in a heartbeat, with one phone call or a tragic accident. This gift called life is fragile and none of us can escape its seriousness. When Jesus says, "***Do not let your hearts be troubled,***" there is a part of me that responds, "***How on earth can we stop our hearts from being troubled when life can be so troubling?***"

In our gospel lesson, Jesus and his disciples are in the midst of a very serious and troubling moment in life. Jesus knows that his hour has come and that his death is imminent. He has just told his disciples that he only has a short time to be with them and that they cannot go where he is going. The disciples are confused and alarmed by his words. They believed that Jesus was

the Messiah--the one who would deliver them and the whole world, the one on whom they had pinned all their hopes, all their lives—and now he's leaving?

This context of crisis and desperation is the key to interpreting and understanding Jesus' words. Everything Jesus says at this last supper is meant to comfort and reassure his disciples that he is not abandoning them, and to prepare them to continue the work they have begun together. ***"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, and believe in me."*** Jesus knows that life is about to get very serious, and so he says, ***"Trust me and trust the one who sent me. I am going to prepare a place for you in my Father's house, and you know the way to the place I am going."***

But the disciples do not understand all the metaphorical language Jesus is using, and they start to panic. Thomas says what all of them are thinking, ***"Lord, we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way?"***

And Jesus responds, ***"I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."***

Clearly, these words of Jesus are not about who will or won't get into heaven. They are about how to get to God—how to draw near to God when life gets really serious. Jesus is saying, ***"I've been showing you the way to God this whole time I've been with you. You know the Way we've been traveling together. You know the Truth I've been teaching you. You know the Life we've been living. Just keep going in this way. Keep on trusting in God, following in the way I have taught you, loving one another as I have love you, and I'll be right there in the midst of you. On one level, I'm about to leave you, but on a deeper level, we'll be closer than ever. Now I walk beside you on the way as a guide, but after I go, I will walk within you. You will be my feet, my hands, my body in the world. Don't worry. Trust me and trust the One who sent me."***

Jesus is "going away" like a tablet dissolving into water. The tablet is gone, but its presence pervades the water entirely. Jesus' physical absence becomes the **way** for the new presence of Christ's Spirit to dwell within us.

Or, as God speaks in Rilke's poem, ***"Embody me. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Just don't let yourself lose me...Give me your hand."***

This is what Jesus was trying to tell his first disciples, and each of his disciples through the centuries, all the way down to you and me. The secret to enduring the seriousness of life is to believe in God...to trust in God...to just keep going, and no matter what happens, never let go of God's hand. As the Psalmist wrote in our Psalm for today, "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge...You are my rock, my fortress, my crag, my **stronghold**."

A little over a week ago, the world lost an incredibly wise, compassionate and faithful human being, Rabbi Harold Kushner. He wrote many inspiring books offering guidance on how to find

faith and courage in the midst of unbearable tragedy. In closing, I'd like to share a post about Rabbi Kushner written by Pastor Martin Thielen on his website **The Doubter's Parish**.

Thielen writes: Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote his best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, in response to the illness and eventual death of his son Aaron, who suffered with a rare disease called progeria, which means rapid aging. Aaron never grew beyond three feet tall, had no hair on his head or body, looked like a little old man while he was still a child, and Aaron died at age 14. It was an agonizing experience for the whole family, and Kushner doesn't sugar coat it in his book. He is brutally honest about the anger, frustration, grief and depression. And yet, even in that kind of suffering, Rabbi Kushner learned that God gives his children the strength to cope with whatever life brings.

For the Kushner family, that strength came in two forms. First, it came through people. God sustained the Kushner family throughout Aaron's illness by people who cared for them. Like the man who made Aaron a scaled-down tennis racquet suitable to his size. Or the friend who gave him a baseball autographed by the entire Red Sox team. And by the children who overlooked Aaron's appearance and physical limitations and played stickball with him in the backyard. Kushner said this kind of caring was God's way of telling his family that they were not alone, not cast off. God's strength to cope usually came through human instruments.

But the strength to cope also came directly from God. Kushner speaks often about God's gifts of courage, strength and hope. When Kushner reached the limits of his own resources, he found reinforcement from a source beyond himself. God and other people were there for him. And through that strength, he found the resiliency to go on living. Although God could not protect the Kushner family from suffering, God gave them the strength to cope with their tragedy with courage, hope and dignity. God enabled them to live fully, bravely, meaningfully and even joyfully in a less than perfect world. The closing line of Rabbi Kushner's book says: "Yesterday seems less painful, and I am not afraid of tomorrow." (End of post)

Like Jesus, Rabbi Kushner was Jewish, not Christian. But he clearly knew all about walking in the Way, the Truth and the Life. And through his writings, he will continue to help millions of others find their way to God when life gets really serious. Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." In God's huge heart of love, there is room for everyone, not only Christians.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today Jesus reminds us that we know the Way. When life gets really serious, may we help each other to believe in God, to hold onto God, and to keep on walking in Jesus' Way, Truth and Life together. Amen.