

The Way

*A sermon by the Rev. Louise Kalemkerian
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

EASTER 5: MAY 7, 2023

ACTS 7:55-60 | PSALM 31:1-5,15-16 | 1 PETER 2:2-10 | JOHN 14:1-14

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Congregation: The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

You did a whole lot better than the nine o'clock folks. *[Laughter]*. I made them repeat it several times till they got it right. *[Laughter]*

You know, in these 50 days of Easter, this is the way people used to greet each other on the street - with the greeting of the resurrection. And sometimes we Episcopalians kind of drop it off after the first week, but yes, you did really well. *[Laughter]* Alleluia! Christ is risen.

For the next three Sundays, we get passages from John's Gospel, from what is known as Jesus' Farewell Address or Farewell Discourse, the words that he spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper as he was preparing to leave them. This is a whole long passage which starts in the middle of chapter 13 and goes to the end of chapter 17, so it's a really long reading. We never read it all at once, but rather in bits and pieces. But part of this Farewell Address, or Farewell Discourse, are also the verses that were read at Father Daniel's Institution on Tuesday: "Love one another as I have loved you." This long passage was meant to comfort the disciples and prepare them for the new opportunities that awaited them.

Today's section of this passage is particularly a favorite at funerals, for the first few verses especially: "Do not let your hearts be troubled.", "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places." The problem comes after Jesus says he is "the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father, except through him."

Is Jesus telling us here that Christianity is the only way to God, and for God to know us? Is he saying that a faithful Jew or Buddhist or Hindu has no chance of eternal happiness in those many dwelling places? I don't think so.

Early Christians used the Greek word "hodos," which means "the way," to describe literally and figuratively the paths that their lives followed. Remember, the Wise Men, the Magi returned to their home country by another way. Jesus' disciples spoke of what happened to them along the way to Emmaus. Hodos could also refer to a way of life: Jesus pointed to John the Baptist as one who came in the "Hodos," in the way of righteousness. And if we read the book of Acts, by the end of that book, those first century Christians refer to their communal life in Christ as "the way."

Jesus' response to all disciples in every generation is: "I am the way. I am the security you crave. I am the hope you are looking for. I'm inviting you into the community I share with

God. If you try and follow me, you will find God and God will live in you.” Jesus did not say, “I am the answer to everything.” (Sometimes something some Christians assume that he did, but he never did.) And there's a difference between these two descriptions. The former, “the way,” invites grand adventure and openness to all of the ambiguities and doubts that go with a journey along uncertain paths; the latter suggests a packaged arrangement, a relationship involving little risk.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life. If you know me, you will know my Father also.” But Jesus offers no roadmap, no master plan, no PowerPoint presentation - just himself. Just the messy, intimate, ever evolving and often confusing business of being in relationship with others, of loving one another, of being trusting and patient and vulnerable.

What Philip and Thomas, and perhaps you and I, don't get is that Jesus' way is not exclusive or exclusionary as much as some would have it - rather it is the way of inclusion, of hospitality, of extravagant love, of welcome. Jesus' way is that of the sower who went out to sow and scattered his seeds everywhere. *Everywhere.*

Jesus is the way of that man who found weeds growing in his field, in his wheat field, and he said, “That's okay. Dandelions make good wine.” Jesus' way is of a man who had two sons, one who stayed home and one who, and kept all the rules, and one who was a loser and got busted. And guess what? He loved them both.

Jesus' way is of the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep, and then has sheep that aren't even part of this fold and so he goes looking for them. Jesus' way is that of the Syrophenician woman who reminded him that outsiders have a place at God's table too. Jesus' way is that of the Samaritan woman to whom he offered living water.

This is the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus.

Jesus is the way to God because Jesus is one with the Father. That means, not only that Jesus is our way to God, but also that Jesus is God's way to us - those of us who profess his name and say that we are his followers. That when we look at Jesus and see his boundary-breaking love, his far-flung compassion for the downtrodden and the sick, his gracious way with the left out and the left behind - then we see God. We are not looking at an imitation of God or even some mirror image of God. We are seeing God for real.

As Christians, we have today the same mission as Jesus had from his Father: to spread the good news of the Father's love and compassion and mercy. Our mission, like that of Jesus, is to help establish the kingdom (or “kindom”) of God, a kingdom of justice and peace and love. Like Jesus, we are to reach out to the alienated and the suffering. We are to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, and welcome the stranger, and clothe the naked, house the homeless - and not as charity but as to our brothers and sisters. That was the mission of Jesus, and that's our mission as the presence of the Risen Christ on this planet.

Add to that mission today the mission to save the planet, God's creation. God's gorgeous creation. Save it from global warming. In the offertory anthem, the choir sang at Tuesday's celebration, “God has much work for us to do.” Till all the jails are empty and all the bellies are filled, till no one hurts or steals or lies, and no more blood is spilled. Till age and race

and gender no longer separate. By sitting at a bedside to hold pale, trembling hands. By speaking for the powerless against unjust demands. God has worked for us to do.

Jesus' way is the road you and I are called to emulate, to imitate, to follow - the way of openness, of generosity, of self-giving love, of a forgiveness. The way of Desmond Tutu, or Stephen the Deacon, or Teresa of Calcutta, or Martin Luther King, or all the ordinary folk you and I know and have known in our lives. Over and over, research has proven that people are attracted to and convert to following Jesus because of the way Christians live their lives - not because some evangelist tells them so. It's a huge responsibility for all of us. In the words of the old cliché from the sixties: You may be the old only Bible some people read.

Jesus invites us to see his life as the way we may live in the world with our own unique abilities. Jesus is expansive in his love for the little ones of the world. In his words and deeds we see the truth that he invites us to live day by day. "Here is the way," he says, "and my word and my love and my body."

Certainly, walking Jesus' way isn't always easy. Maya Angelou once remarked: "I'm working at trying to be a Christian, and that's serious business. It's not something where you think, 'Oh, I've got it done today. I did it all day. Hot diggity.'" The truth is, she says, "All day long you try to do it, to be it, and then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmm, I only blew it 86 times today. Not bad. I'm trying to be a Christian.'" "

That's what Jesus calls us to be: to be his disciples and followers to the best of our abilities.

We're trying to walk the way that Jesus holds out for us, to do the work God has given us to do.

The tasks are endless - may we always keep trying.