

Message from Pastor John
May 10, 2020

We are familiar with this passage being used at funerals to assure us of the promise of Life Eternal, but we have to remember that when the disciples heard it from the lips of Jesus they had not experienced the Resurrection and were very obviously struggling with Jesus's meaning. Not to mention the increasing stress they were under as opposition mounted and the situation was escalating.

Their hearts were "troubled" and it was the anxiety of their hearts on that night that kept them from hearing Jesus give final instructions. The disciples who gather with Jesus for the farewell meal almost certainly have a measure of heartburn. Their hearts are torn and disquieted as they hear Jesus say a long good-bye.

They have been following Jesus since he began his public ministry, but they are, at best, adolescent in their understanding of his message, vision, and mission. They are not able to comprehend that their lives and future are about to radically change.

They have been looking for a Messiah and believe that they have found him. They believe the Messiah to be immortal, but Jesus is about to be executed. They have a vision of a messianic strongman who will liberate the people from occupation, but he is about to be seemingly defeated by oppression.

They believe that the Messiah will usher in an eternal kingdom of peace, but they are about to experience horror beyond their most terrified imaginations.

How does the heart feast at the banquet table of disappointment and defeat? This scripture is frequently used as a passage of comfort and

support to families and mourners at funeral and memorial services, but the disciples of the text find no balm in the words.

All that they have hoped for throughout their lives, which they have believed has come to fruition in Jesus, will soon be nailed to a cross. It will be a long time before they realize that the messianic message is eternal, even if the flesh and blood man before them is not immortal. Death will have neither the last nor the lasting word. For us with our knowledge of the Resurrection these might be words of comfort but not for the disciples.

One similarity between then and now – is that when we hear these words at a funeral and they heard them at a meal before the arrest and crucifixion both are doorstep moments. Both are thresholds between how life is today and how life is tomorrow. Both require a re-think and re-set of expectations and actions. Both represent a moment when we are required to step into a new reality.

David Bartlet, preacher and writer, discussing Jesus's words, uses a challenging image of "the disciples are expected a maternity unit midwife and got a hospice chaplain."

When their hopeful visions for a just and peaceful messianic kingdom melt in the crucible of crucifixion, the hearts of the disciples will be "troubled"—and their anxiety will be blinding. More than Jesus' body will perish; a hospice chaplain is needed in the upper room as the disciples' understanding of the mission of Jesus, and of themselves, passes away.

Yet our experiences of a maternity midwife and a hospice chaplain are startlingly similar.

In both the maternity wing and the hospice room, the family is changed—all things are being made new. We have no choice about crossing these threshold events. Cross we must and life will be different. Plans and visions of who we are, of how life will be, our dreams and hopes will be radically altered.

However, in these moments, even as Christ is leading us, we often echo Thomas in asking how we can know the way if we do not know where God is going; with Philip we claim that we will be satisfied if we can just see.

The disciples want to cling to the perceived safety of their knowledge—they fear the unknown and uncontrollable--they want to know where Jesus is going and how to go there with him.

John tells us time and time again of the power and intimacy of close relationships. Of how they cannot be broken and of how they will be a source of strength. The sheep are kept close to the shepherd; Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in him; I go before you to prepare a place.

As they are sitting in the room sharing the feast of loss, John's Jesus attempts to assure them that there will be a place with plenty of rooms for them; the relationship is going to continue, even as it changes. They will not be forgotten nor lost.

Jesus's opening command. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," is a direction to the disciples' will. It is a command to stand firm, even when their hearts abandon them. Their hopes of a messianic strongman will be replaced with a revolution and lives that only engaged compassion love and forgiveness can bring.

Birth and death are fraught with pain but are also full of the potential for transformation.

Doorsteps and thresholds crossing points: a space between rooms, a portal from the outside to the inside. A place where we need a companion, a savior strong and true who can be both midwife and chaplain, someone who will help us navigate the loss of false hopes and facilitate a safe crossing to the terrain of salvation.

Jesus promises the disciples, and us:

“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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”
Amen.