

Sermon for May 10, 2020 – “Messy Proof”

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A – Texts: Psalm 31:1-5, 14-16; John 14:1-14
Rev. Dr. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church

We're on the back half of Easter heading towards the Ascension and Pentecost. To be sure, we're still celebrating the resurrection on this great seven-week-long day of the resurrection. But as the day gets longer we're starting to look forward, as we should, to what comes next in this world of the resurrected Christ.

Today, in our gospel reading, as I mentioned we hear the beginning of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse." Jesus is preparing His disciples for what's about to happen over the next few days and beyond the time when He will no longer be with them. What we heard are familiar words spoken at many funerals. They are words of comfort and assurance. When used in the context of a funeral we tend to stick to the words of comfort. But today, we get the bigger picture. Jesus begins by telling them about what's been prepared for them by the Father. **"Do not let your hearts be troubled,"** He says, **"Believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house, there are many dwelling places."** Jesus says that God has room for many, an idea foreign to the world of the disciples where most believed that God only had time and space for the very righteous. So naturally the disciples aren't entirely sure about this. Two of them have doubts. They ask questions.

Thomas is the first. Thomas asks a vulnerable question, an honest question. He says to Jesus, **"Lord, we do not know where You are going. How can we know the way."** An excellent question. Thomas, as we well know, expresses the doubt side of faith, the uncertainty of faith, the part of faith that questions our own worthiness. It's a question that's echoed through the centuries. If you've ever asked it—don't feel guilty, it's been asked by lots of people including some really famous people. It was asked by St. Augustine and which led to the doctrine of original sin. It was asked by Martin Luther which led to the Reformation and the Reformed doctrine of unconditional grace. It's still asked today by many who wonder what the future holds. So, Thomas' question is a genuine one; one that desires to draw closer to and understand God. It's a question that I'm willing to bet that most of us either have asked—or probably will ask. We ask it when our doubt is real but also when we're open and honest about ourselves when our doubt is about us and the role that we play in our faith. So trust me when I say it's okay to ask it.

Jesus answers Thomas, but Philip isn't satisfied. Philip's question sounds less like a question than a demand. He says, **"Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied."** If we're not careful we can skip past this statement and focus only on Jesus' words about how He and the Father are one.

Yet, if we pause to consider what Philip has said we see just how problematic it is. **“Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.”** It’s rooted in insecurity. It comes from a place of discomfort, from a place that prefers **not** to live with the uncertainty of Thomas’ question. It demands an immediate answer instead of pausing to explore the question. We know this all too well. We have moments when we make demands of God when we want faith to be easy, simple, and certain, comforting. Sometimes, like Philip, we just want to be satisfied and avoid dealing with the real questions of faith.

Someone once asked me why we had to study the Bible talking about things like context and so forth and not just take it for face value. I’m sure many of you have felt the same way. You know what I mean; you feel fairly secure in your faith, you know what the Bible says (thank you very much). You’re good to go! At the same time we all have our Thomas moments and our Philip moments. Moments when we can **honestly** and **openly** ask genuine questions of faith like Thomas... **“How can we know the way?”** Moments when we just want to jump to the answers. Moments when we, like Philip, don’t want to deal with the struggles/uncertainty, of believing in Jesus, when we want to cut to the chase and shout out **“Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.”** Show me the beef. Show me the money. Show me the Father. We want proof and we want it now!

What’s happening here, the contrast between these disciples, demonstrates just how fickle we can be when it comes to God. At the same time Jesus’ response to these two very different ways of asking essentially the same thing shows us how God is with us. Jesus gives neither Thomas nor Philip what they **want**. Jesus instead gives them what they **need**. To Thomas Jesus responds with assurance. He doesn’t tell Thomas **what** the way is but instead **who** the way is. Jesus tells Thomas that it isn’t about **our** ability to know the way to God but about **who** will take us there. Jesus assures Thomas that **He’s** one taking us to the Father, that **He’s** the one who will guide us to the house of many dwelling places. Jesus says, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you know Me, you will know My Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him.”** Jesus will show us the Father.

And even though Jesus sounds almost hurt, possibly a bit annoyed with Philip in his question: **“How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”** Jesus nevertheless responds to Philip. He recognizes Philip’s discomfort and uncertainty. So He simply reminds Philip what he’s seen and heard. He reminds Philip who he’s speaking with, the Messiah. The one who comes in the name of Father, who reveals the Father, who does the Father’s works. **“Have I been with you all this time, Philip and you still do not know Me? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own but the Father who dwells in Me does His works.”**

“Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me. But if you do not then believe Me because of the works themselves.” While it may not be the evidence or proof of which Philip can be certain or that will satisfy, I think that it’s something **more**. A **promise** of something more. More than the potential to do greater works or that Jesus would do anything asked for in His name. No, this is a promise of a **relationship**. A messy, uncertain, faith demanding promise made through relationship instead of evidence. A different kind of relationship. A particular type of relationship. An intimate relationship.

That this is about relationship is not coincidental; sprinkled throughout Jesus’ words to His disciples is wedding language. What am I talking about? Well, as I’ve come to understand it when couples got married in Jesus’ day the arrangements would be made between the two families and once agreed upon the groom-to-be would return to his father’s house. He would then begin to build an addition onto the house. A room where he and his bride would live in wedded bliss after the ceremony. If there were many sons, which was usually the plan, there’d be many rooms. See where I’m going with this? But wait, there’s more! The day of the wedding the groom would arrive at the home of his betrothed and offer her a symbolic cup of wine. If she accepted the cup and drank from it the ceremony would proceed, often lasting several days or until you ran out of wine. Unless, of course, Jesus happened to be there. We see this same imagery of a cup being offered in the Garden of Gethsemane later that evening. We see it in Jesus’ words, **“Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me...Yet not My will—but Yours be done.”** This reveals the same intimacy between the Son and the Father that Jesus is taking about in our Gospel reading. This is what Jesus is talking about in His response to Philip. Jesus reminds him that this relationship isn’t easy, that having faith in the Father isn’t easy. It’s about the Father’s will being done, not something we’re able to control nor even fully understand.

Is it any wonder that Philip is uncomfortable? That we’re uncomfortable? No, because we want control. We want comfort. We want certainty. And we want it **now**. The good news, and here brothers and sisters is the thing, whether we’re Thomas despite our doubts open and ready for Jesus, or whether we’re Philip uncomfortable and impatient, Jesus meets us where we are. Jesus meets us in all of our doubts, in all of our discomfort, in all of our anxiety, in all our fear, in all our brokenness, in all our messiness, in all our flawed humanity. He said, **“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you. “I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”**

And Jesus reminds our troubled hearts that He is the Way, the Way to God’s house to the room prepared especially for us. He reminds us that He is the Truth revealed to us in human form. He reminds us that He is the Life, new Life, resurrection Life, offered to all.

Christ is Risen.

Christ is Risen indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.