

Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 14:1-14
May 14, 2017

Within

How we hear a passage of scripture depends a lot on where we are standing when we hear it.

In my first year as a student in Scotland, I traveled down to London during the Christmas break. Being a conscientious tourist, I tried to make it to all the requisite sites – the Tower of London, Parliament House, Buckingham Palace, the British Museum, Westminster Abbey – the whole list. I gawked at the statues and tried to read all the Latin inscriptions. I did what a tourist does and saw the sites through a tourist's eyes.

When Sunday morning arrived, I got up bright and early, and went back to Westminster Abbey for the morning Eucharist.

An usher in frock coat and pinstriped trousers stopped me at the door. "The service is about to begin," he snapped. "Come back later through the tourist entrance."

"But I'm not here to tour," I said. "I'm here to worship."

The usher's demeanor changed immediately. "Oh," he said. "In that case, young man, follow me."

He walked me along a side aisle right up to the front of the Abbey, through a heavy oaken door, and up some steps. We emerged in the Choir, right behind the lectern. He handed me an order of service, and said, "God bless you."

A few minutes later, the organ rumbled, the congregation rose to its feet, and the procession began. First came the cross, lifted high, then the choir, followed by the clergy. As I recall, the opening hymn was, "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven."

Seen and heard from a tourist's perspective, Westminster Abbey is a grand museum full of interesting tombs and statues. Seen and heard from the last row of the Choir, just behind the tenors and boy altos, it's a house of living stones.

Where are you standing when you hear the words of Jesus in the 14th chapter of John's Gospel?

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.

Are you standing by an open grave, (obscured by the funeral director's carpet of plastic grass, but a grave nonetheless)? Is your heart troubled? Are you grieving? Is Jesus speaking to you?

These are words often spoken at funerals and memorial services, but that's not where they are heard first. In the context of John's Gospel, they come as Jesus is having a meal with his disciples, just after he has washed the disciples' feet and given them a new commandment. Just after he has warned, **"One of you will betray me."**

The disciples are confused, disoriented, anxious about what is happening. Their teacher has just stripped down to his skivvies and knelt to wash their feet. Judas has ducked out in a hurry, still chewing the morsel of bread that Jesus had given him.

The disciples sense that something big is about to happen, but they aren't sure what it might be. *I won't be with you much longer*, Jesus tells them. *I'm going away, and where I am going, you cannot come right now.* **"I give you a new commandment. Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another."**

And don't worry. Don't let your hearts be troubled. My Father's house has more than enough room for all of you. I'm going away to prepare a place for you. I'll return, and you know the way to the place where I am going.

Thomas, a disciple who often asks the question everybody is thinking, but nobody else has the courage to ask, says, **"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"**

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

Where are you standing when you hear these words? Are you standing at that open grave? With these disciples in their anxiety and confusion? Or are you standing in some other place? It makes all the difference.

Maybe you're under a large tent with sawdust on the ground. Or in a football stadium rented for the occasion. The preacher has been going on for quite some time, telling you about a God who sounds a little like the Father Jesus is talking about, but only a little.

This God also has a house with many rooms, but there are locks on all the doors. The only way to get in is to have a special key, and that key, he tells you, is Jesus himself. He's the way, the truth, the life, and no one gets into the Father's house unless they profess their faith in Jesus.

What's more, it's got to be a *certain kind* of faith – the kind that asks no questions. The kind that learns the rules and dares not break them. The kind of faith that rests not so much in God's love for the world, so clearly seen in Jesus, as in the superiority of one religious system over all the others.

If you're standing by that open grave, or longing for comfort, or anxious about your future with God, you might hear these words of Jesus as gracious welcome. But if these are the only words of Jesus you have heard, you might hear a door slamming shut and a bolt being shoved into place.

To me, standing in the choir, these are some of the most gracious words of scripture, but that's because I have heard the rest of the story.

I believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is also, as John's Gospel testifies, the Good Shepherd, the gate, the bread of life, the true vine, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life. John has lots of names for Jesus, every one of them a metaphor because you can't convey mystery without metaphor.

But John's Gospel has is more than a catalog of metaphors. In John, Jesus is also one who acts. He's the wedding guest who performs a miracle of hospitality, the rabbi who chats with a foreign woman at the well, the guest of honor who eats with sinners and tax collectors, the teacher who washes his disciples' feet, the Savior who refuses to save himself.

The purpose of John's Gospel is to reveal the living God. **"No one has ever seen God,"** John writes in his prologue. **"It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."**

Jesus makes known God's heart of love – love for the whole world – not just for the few of us insiders who can sing the opening hymn without a hymnbook. God is love for those who wander up and down the abbey, admiring the statuary, but wondering what all the fuss is about. God is love for the folks who hear these words of Jesus not as comfort, but as condemnation. God is love for world and everyone in it.

God is love, and Jesus is God's word of love incarnate. He is God's way of showing us that God has chosen not to be God without us. God loves with a spacious, roomy love which becomes flesh not only in what Jesus says, but also in what he does. He welcomes the outcast. He touches the leper. He opens the eyes of the blind. He weeps at his friend's grave. He humbles himself and takes the form a servant. All for the sake of leading us to the place where he himself already stands – close to the heart of God.

Jesus is the way that makes room for the world, the truth that supersedes dogma, the life that welcomes us into the embrace of the God whose life and love will never end.

So, do not let your hearts be troubled, beloved. Neither let them be afraid. If you are standing within the circle of God's love today, receive Jesus' words as good news. And if you cannot, at this moment in your journey, step within that circle, let not your heart be troubled. The circle of God's love is much wider than you think.

There is already a place for you, and the door is never locked.