

5 Easter – Year A – May 22, 2011
Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14
Susan E. Wilmot

Jesus said to Thomas, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” You know the old story of the three blind men and the elephant. It goes a little like this. Three blind men come across an elephant. The first man reaches out and takes hold of the elephant’s tail, and describes the creature as thin, rope like and flexible. The second man reaches out and touches the elephant’s leg. He tells the first man that he’s wrong, the creature is not thin at all, but more like a tree trunk with rough skin that stands straight, firm and strong. The third man is standing in front of the elephant, and can feel its tusk. He tells the other two that they’re both wrong, the creature is smooth, with sharp curving points that could be used for attack or defense. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we’re all just like the three blind men. Our perspectives are often shaped by what *we* feel is right, or what *we* want to be right to justify our own perspective. Our viewpoint is frequently as thin or narrow as the elephant’s tail, as rough and unrefined as its legs, as dangerous as its tusks, and even used in fear as a way to defend our position, when we feel our beliefs are threatened.

There’s an elephant in the room today. These nineteen words that have been repeatedly ripped from their context, and used to bully and bludgeon non-believers, those who hold different religious beliefs, and even Christians against Christians. These nineteen words out of the thousands in Scripture that when used with violent intent deny the broader truth of Jesus’ life and mission to reconcile the **whole world** to God in Christ Jesus. Nineteen little words, that when misused rip out the heart of God’s promise of abundant life in Christ. Nineteen words that nonetheless form the nucleus of intense interest. So, we’ll take these nineteen words as the starting point for our journey of exploration. A journey that Jesus tells us we don’t need a route map to follow. A journey that is entirely relational in nature. A journey to a new perspective, to view a new creation that only Jesus can prepare for us, and prepare us to enter. A mystery that only Christ’s life, death and resurrection has brought into being. Our journey and our destination is the kingdom of God. The real questions are how we find our way there. What is the truth embodied there, and what does life in the kingdom look like?

Before we begin, we need to talk about the elephant in the room, which are the questions that these nineteen words do not answer. “So is it true that believing in Jesus is the only way to get into heaven?” Or, “What happens to those who don’t believe in Jesus? What about those who’ve never heard of Jesus? Are they all going to hell?” The most tragic legacy of the misuse of this passage of Scripture is that we all assume that we know what Jesus is teaching here. We all think we know what the elephant looks like, that our perspective is correct, and everyone else is wrong. Actually, there are other passages of the Bible that speak to the questions about life after death. Most notably in Paul’s letter to the Romans, the Book of Acts, the many stories of Jesus’ deeds of compassion and justice, healing and reconciliation throughout the Gospels, as well as the righteous outsiders who do God’s will as told in the Hebrew Scriptures. Despite wanting all the answers, and really wanting to be right, what we discover is the annoyingly expansive nature of God’s grace, plus the infuriating mystery of God’s perfect judgment. In faith, we have to trust that God is God and some things will always be out of our reach. What isn’t a mystery is what is revealed in John 14 about Jesus, God’s kingdom and resurrection life now.

The setting is the Last Supper, the night before Jesus is unjustly condemned crucified. Jesus washes the feet of all His disciples, and asks them if they understand His gift of humble service. Judas leaves the feast to betray Jesus. In that first step on the path of betrayal, Jesus tells the others that He is about to be glorified through His suffering and death on a cross. He gives the disciples a new commandment to love one another as He loves us. Then Jesus tells the disciples that where He’s going they cannot follow. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection have a completely unique role in God’s plan of salvation, in God’s way of reconciling the whole creation to Himself through Christ Jesus. Only Jesus’ death and resurrection can and

does inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. Only Jesus' life, death and resurrection reveal a new way of knowing God's truth. Jesus **is** the new perspective on being fully human, He is the new direction on living into the fullness of Truth, and the One who blesses us with abundant life. In other words, the Word made flesh, Jesus incarnate, is *the* most complete revelation of God that the world will ever know. Only Jesus accomplishes the salvation of the whole world.

The disciples are immediately distressed. All they hear is that Jesus is going and abandoning them. This is where we enter into the story today. Jesus speaks words of comfort in response to this overwhelming fear of abandonment. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." As we've seen, the place Jesus is going is to the cross. He must die for the life of the world, and to create God's kingdom on earth. He says that He will return shortly to show the disciples this mysterious new place prepared for them. Like many other places in John's Gospel, we have the possibility of multiple layers of understanding here. The return of Jesus, can be equally understood as His resurrection appearances to the disciples, or it can be considered the second coming of Christ at the end of time. The Father's house is often thought to mean heaven, but it can also be understood as the in breaking kingdom of God. This is the place where God's presence on earth is revealed to the world in and through the lives of Jesus' disciples. The kingdom of God continues to be revealed in your life and mine, and the lives of all believers. It's truly a question of perspective. When Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," He's most likely teaching the disciples about resurrection life, and how they can participate in it for the rest of their earthly journeys. There's nothing in this text to suggest that Jesus or the disciples were considering whom they may or may not meet in heaven. Furthermore, within the context of the dialogue, the greater things that they will achieve include increasing the Body of Christ, and spreading the kingdom of God.

Thomas, Philip, and perhaps even the other disciples then and now don't understand what Jesus is talking about. They're looking for specific directions to a place where they can meet up with Jesus. They want the route mapped out clearly. Jesus doesn't care whether we understand the mystery or not. He does care that we trust God, trust Him, and stay in relationship, because all we need can be found in knowing Him. This is not intellectual knowledge or assent. It is not knowing *about* God or Jesus. It is the intimate knowledge of an ongoing, personal relationship. We know God through our relationship with Jesus. We know what characterizes God through Jesus' life, which reveals the love, mercy and grace of God. We see God's compassion in Jesus' way of drawing others into community, healing and reconciling outcasts and sinners. We know what helps us to grow in relationship with God in the way Jesus studies and teaches Scripture. We know that God desires intimacy through Jesus' prayers to God the Father. Inasmuch as we put our faith into loving action flowing from God's love, humbly serving our neighbors, working for peace, justice and equality, we are glorifying God's name, and co-creating the kingdom of God on earth today. There is no road map for our hands to hold. The way, the truth and the life to God's kingdom **is** in following Jesus' example. It's written on our hearts by faith and it's all by God's initiative, and God's grace. In faith and trust, our only concern is to complete the work that God has given each of us to do. Our mission is to share God's love expansively, and love and serve others as His humble servants.

Living in the Light, we see that we're already at home with God. As Christ's Body, as God's hands and feet in the world, we are already experiencing growth and transformation in our resurrection lives, our kingdom lives now. As Martin Luther wrote, "The God on whom we may hang our hearts has room for us". Our hearts need not be troubled. In the spacious hospitality of God, all we need for abundant life is found in our relationship with Christ Jesus.

Amen.