

Sermon for Easter 5 Year A 2020
Troubled Hearts in Living Stones

Do not let your hearts be troubled . . .

Despite what Jesus says about not letting our hearts be troubled,
I confess that these days my heart is troubled . . .
and I suspect many of yours might be also.

On this fifth Sunday of Easter,
the setting of our Gospel is grim and somber
because we have been brought back in time to
the night of Jesus' betrayal.

Jesus has just finished a last supper with his disciples.
He has washed their feet, given them a new commandment,
predicted Peter's denial,
foretold Judas' betrayal,
and told his friends that he is about to leave them.

*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.
If it were not so, would I have told you
that I go to prepare a place for you?*

But just before Jesus tells this to his disciples,
he has told Peter, *Where I am going you cannot follow me now . . .*

Needless to say, the words sting,
and fill the bewildered disciples with fear.

What is Jesus talking about?

How will they survive if he leaves them?

Where will they go?

What will happen to their cherished plans?

Why is the ground shifting beneath their feet?

Why is everything changing?

If you're like me, sheltering at home, reading the daily headlines, and fearing what life is going to look like for the next many months—years?—then perhaps we can all relate to the disciples' questions. Why is the ground shifting beneath *our* feet? What's going to happen to our families, our towns, our nations, our world? Will the center hold? Where is Jesus in all of this pain, fear, death, and loss—and how will we find him if he's gone to a place "we cannot follow now?"

The anxious disciples, unsurprisingly, respond to their predicament by demanding certainty. Thomas asks Jesus for a roadmap: *How can we know the way?* Philip asks for proof: *Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.* What they want—what we *all* want, if we're honest—is the religion of the GPS, the five-point plan, the twelve steps, the ten commandments. "Do A, B, and C, and you will unerringly arrive at destination D."

But how does Jesus respond? *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. I am the way, and the truth, and the life. If you know me, you will know my Father also.* No roadmap. No master plan. No power-point presentation. Jesus just offers himself. Just the messy, intimate, ever evolving, and often confusing stuff of faith and relationship. Of trust, patience, and vulnerability.

But despite what Jesus says about not letting our hearts be troubled . . .
They are.

None of us get through this life without a troubled heart . . .
even in the best of times when we weren't navigating the uncertainties
of a global pandemic, rising unemployment and worrying about whether
we will ever be able to gather and go about our lives in the same way
as we did just a few short months ago.

Certainly, we cannot look at the pain of the world today,
or the suffering of a loved one, or our own wounds and hurts
and not have a troubled heart.

At least . . . I hope we can't.

This is the context in which we hear Jesus say,
Do not let your hearts be troubled.

It seems to me that in many ways it is not that different from the context
in which Jesus first said these words.

And yet . . . perhaps you want to say as I do to Jesus,
don't you know what is happening in our lives and in our world today?
How can Jesus say that to us the face of all the soul troubling things
wracking our world in small and large ways?

How do we begin to make sense of today's gospel in a world whose
heart is constantly troubled?

This passage so often is chosen for funeral services.

Nothing troubles our hearts quite like death . . .

and we need and yearn to find some balance,
some ballast, some comfort and consolation.

And yet . . . this passage is about more than the afterlife.

It has something to say to us right here and right now.

And it speaks to the very circumstances that trouble our hearts today.

Think about when your heart has been troubled
as it may well be right now.

What does that feel like?

We all experience it in our own ways but perhaps some of these descriptions might sound familiar:
isolated, paralyzed, overwhelmed, powerless,
off balance, out of control, disconnected, afraid,
thoughts spinning in your head, no stability,
despair, grief, tears, anger . . .

In the midst of a troubled heart, the unspoken question is this:
Will the center hold or is everything collapsing around us?
Thomas and Philip are feeling the collapse.
Much of the world—and many of us—are wondering,
will the center hold?

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Jesus recognizes that our hearts are troubled.
He is not warning us about a future condition.
He knows the troubling has already begun.
He can see it in us because he has experienced it within himself—
His soul was troubled when he saw Mary and Martha weeping at the
death of Lazarus—
So Jesus knows that there is no on/off switch for a troubled heart.
But Jesus also knows that our lives and the world are not defined by or
limited to what troubles our hearts.

What if not letting our hearts be troubled begins with looking into our
hearts and seeing and naming what troubles them?
This means facing our selves, our lives, our world.
That may be the first and most difficult thing
Jesus asks of us in today's gospel.
Sometimes we don't want to see, we don't want to name what's there.
It's too difficult and too painful.
It's take us too close to the edge of the abyss
and a free fall into a collapsing life and a collapsing world.
Lord, we do not know where you are going.
How can we know the way.

A question that speaks for us all when we have lost our center.

How do we re-center?

Where do we go when it seems everything is collapsing around us?

As usual . . . the answer is a paradox.

Sometimes we have to lose our center in order to find it.

I want to be clear about this:

I'm not suggesting that God purposely de-centers us.

It's just that because we live in a fallen world, de-centering happens.

It's part of life.

It's part of the human condition.

Sometimes it comes out of circumstances we didn't create or choose.

Other times it is a consequence of our choices or actions.

Regardless, Jesus says that is not a place to stay
or a way to live.

It is not the life he lives or offers us.

If our hearts are troubled, then it's time to re-center.

Re-centering doesn't mean our hearts won't be troubled.

It doesn't necessarily fix or solve the problems whatever they may be.

It means that our lives are tethered or grounded or —to use the language
of the first letter of Peter—built on a living cornerstone.

It means that our hearts are held secure by the life of Christ
and we are not free falling into the abyss.

Jesus is reminding us that there is a center—and it is not us.

It is not America and its laws and constitution.

It is not the church and the creeds and doctrines.

It is not our success, accomplishments, position, or power.

We do not have to be the center nor we need to establish it.

In fact, we can't.

Instead, we awaken to it, it is a gift given to us because
we are chosen and precious in God's sight.

We already know the way to and the place of this center—
because we belong to Christ, we are God's own people.

We need to resist buying into the lie that God is apart from, outside of and distant from us.

The center—is within—because Christ dwells within us.

The place, the kingdom is within.

Wherever you go—there is the center, because Christ is there.

Whatever you face, there is the center, because Christ is there.

Regardless of what troubles, there is the center.

Not because you or I are the center—but because God abides with us.

In the language of today's gospel, the center is the Father's house and there are many dwelling places in this house.

In the Father's house, there is a dwelling place for every troubled heart.

This is not just about the after-life,

and I'm not thinking of this as some sort of celestial dormitory

for those have enough right belief and right behavior.

What I'm saying is the dwelling places are the ways God's life intersects with our own—through mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, healing, love, truth, beauty, wisdom, hope, courage, joy, steadfastness and peace.

These are the dwelling places for troubled hearts,

places of re-centering.

Every time we live into and express the divine attributes in our way of being, with our words or by our actions, we regain our center, restore balance, and we take up residence in the Father's house.

What in you today needs re-centering?

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

What if we heard those words and imagined a sign blinking like a heartbeat, or a light in the darkness:

Rooms available.

Rooms available.

Rooms available.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house . . .