

## Sermon, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

““And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”” (John 14:3-5)

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” (John 14:2) These are beautiful and reassuring words. This is one of the passages from the Gospel often chosen for funeral services, lifting up, as it does, our hope that we have an eternal home, a dwelling—a mansion even—with God. Yet what might it mean for us in the here and now? When Jesus tells us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” are we able to allow those words to enter into our current “dwelling places” and quiet our fears? Can we find our way?

Jesus tells the disciples, “You know the place where I am going.” Once again, Thomas is the one who puts into words our longing, our confusion, our lostness: “How can we know the way?” (John 14:5) I love him for that. As a person without a reliable sense of direction, I can identify with a need for directions, a map, a GPS that will lead me on this way. Jesus has even assured the disciples that he will lead them—he is the Good Shepherd after all!

“The way” could be seen as an actual journey or pilgrimage, or it could simply be how one lives one’s everyday life. It could also be an inward spiritual or emotional journey or the religious path one follows. Once I find myself on the

path, sometimes I am blocked by thickets. (I recall from fairy tales the archetypal magical briars the hero encounters when trying to enter the castle). The “thickets” that engender fear can be life events beyond my control: change, loss, or illness. They can arise from bad choices, addictive behavior, or apathy. Whether projected or a response to real circumstances, fear is paralyzing. I am grateful to Thomas for acknowledging that fear is so real and debilitating. It helps me break through my denial, and reclaim the courage and stamina my life road also demands.

Having and knowing the destination seems important; it is also good to have companions. One image we have of “the way” is the rungs of a ladder (found both in Scripture and in the Benedictine Rule). It illustrates how community can function in my life. Climbing on a ladder implies that I am moving upward—but probably not to some Mt. Everest, or some other grand ascent. It may be the movement of my soul yearning to be closer to God. Rungs give me something to hang onto and a place to stand. Being on a ladder I may have a different vantage point. I can see what I did not see before. I gain perspective. I have friends and family, not to exploit and manipulate, but to lend support in an emotional and spiritual sense. As I used to sing in the car with my mother: “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.”

It seems especially important not to go it alone when on a spiritual path. There are pitfalls to do with ego and projections. I can become deluded, confused

or depressed. I can feel that I am being faithful to whatever thread of discernment I am following but I cannot be sure until I test it with a trusted friend or in community. There is a long tradition in Christianity of spiritual friendship and spiritual direction. The traditional relationship is that of spiritual director and directee. But it can also be a relationship of equals with a mutual concern or spiritual affinity. The Celtic term for this is *annam cara*, or “soul friend.”

On one of my walks last week, (I do not remember the day except that the sun was shining), I was coming up on the halfway point where I would turn around and make my way home again. I realized that in spite of the beauty of the day, I was approaching this walk as one more task. I was counting the steps, the miles, the time spent, adhering doggedly to routine. Just a bit ahead of me was a stone bench on the side of the trail. It is named, “Grandpa’s Bench” and has been there as long as I have been walking on this particular path. Even when the trail was resurfaced a few years ago, the bench was preserved and put back in its place. On the opposite side of the bench is an amazing view across the valley. The meadow one sees is part of a bird sanctuary; there are bird houses on poles dotting the landscape here.

For whatever reason, on that day, I took the invitation of the bench to simply sit, and look, and breathe. Facing southwest in late afternoon as I was, the sun fell directly on my face. I noticed a bird in the tree directly in front of me. In the sun its

breast was a deep orange, so I assumed at first that it was a robin. However, I am still trying to identify its call. (I am not a birder by any stretch of the imagination, as much as I love birds). Another bird in a more distant tree responded from time to time with the same call. Time stopped for a bit. My anxieties were soothed; my spirit was healed.

I told this story to my spiritual director. I am grateful to him for this insight: what I had found was *sanctuary*. I thought of this passage of Scripture—especially as it appears as one of the possible opening sentences for the Easter season.

“For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” (Hebrews 9:24)

Then Jesus’ declaration: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)

came into my mind with a freshness, a resurrection newness, that it had not had for me before. “I am the way,” He says. It is not a bad thing to go seeking, to be a pilgrim. Yet it is also true, and part of our present reality, that Jesus seeks us out.

We do not always need a map; we do not always have to be on a physical road.

Jesus is our way, our companion—and our sanctuary. Jesus is our Sabbath rest.

We can pray with David in his Psalm,

“Into your hands I commend my spirit,  
for you have redeemed me,  
O Lord, O God of truth.” (Psalm 31:5)

This is completely out of season, but I think of this verse from *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*:

“And you, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low,  
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow;  
Look now! For glad and glorious hours come swiftly on the wing,  
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing.” (The Rev. Edmund Sears)

Prayer for quiet confidence (BCP p. 832)

“O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*”