

## **Do Not Be Afraid**

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

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What troubles your heart today? We are coming from a situation there in the Dallas area where another mass shooting has violently, violently taken the lives of so many and so many lives cut too short. For me, friends, the list is long and it's not pretty. My heart is troubled by 20 million job losses and more than 475 mass shootings in the United States since January 1, 2023. The war in Ukraine. The families being torn apart in the southern borders of our beloved country. Congregations and theological institutions folding. My heart is troubled by the pain and hurt of the world. My heart is troubled because the virus continues. My heart is troubled because things aren't like they used to be. And my heart is troubled because we are never going back to the way things used to be.

My heart is troubled because I don't know the way, because we don't know the way. I think about all the litanies and prayers we have offered in the last couple of years for the violence and suffering in the world of places such as Syria and Turkey and France, Istanbul and Bangladesh and Baghdad, Beirut and Paris, Minnesota and Dallas. I think about the protests around the world and in our country. I think about health care, immigrants and refugees. I think about racism and poverty. I think about stories of bullying and suicides. I think about Russia and North Korea and increasing global tensions. I think about the nightmare of our political dysfunction in both parties. I think about those grieving and mourning the death of a loved one. I think about families that are struggling, spouses that are divorcing hungry children, and people that are hanging on by a thread. I think about my own sorrows and losses and disappointments. I think about how today's gospel is interpreted and used to exclude, condemn and bludgeon others. Despite what Jesus says about not letting our hearts be troubled, my heart is troubled, and I suspect yours might be too.

What would you add to my list? What is troubling your heart today?

None of us get through this life without a troubled heart. I don't think we could look at the pain of the world today, 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.

That's the context in which I hear Jesus say. Do not let your heart be troubled. It's not that different from the context in which Jesus said those words. Friends, it's the night of the Last Supper. Jesus announced his departure from this world. His death feet have been washed. Judas has left the table and stepped into the nighttime of betrayal. Peter will break his silence with a threefold denial. Thomas is lost and asks, "How can we know the way?" Philip has lost his center and can't see what is right in front of him? "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus says. Do not let your hearts be troubled? Are you kidding me? Is Jesus really serious about that? Does he know what is happening in our lives and

in the world? How can Jesus say that with a straight face, when he was troubled at seeing Mary and the Jews weeping at the death of Lazarus, when he said that his own soul is troubled, and when John tells us that Jesus was troubled in spirit?

What is Jesus telling us? It's not as if there is an on and off switch for troubled hearts. How do we begin to make sense of today's Gospel in a world whose heart is constantly troubled?

As much as I like those words, I wish he would have been a little more specific. But Jesus was never much for a Q&A session. What's going to happen, Lord? Do not let your hearts be troubled. How will we get through this? Do not let your heart be troubled. When will it be over? Do not let your heart be troubled. What will life, the world, the church be like? Do not let your hearts be troubled. Is everything going to be okay? Do not let your hearts be troubled.

It's not hard to understand why this text is so often used in a burial liturgy. Death troubles our hearts, and we want to find some balance, some stability, some harmony. This text, however, is about more than the afterlife. It has something to say right here, right now. It speaks to the very circumstances that trouble our hearts today. Think about times when your heart has been troubled. Maybe it is now. What does that feel like? We all experience it in our own ways, but see if this sounds familiar: Isolated. Paralyzed. Overwhelmed. Powerless. Off balance. Out of control. Disconnected. Afraid, Thoughts spinning in your mind. No stability. Despair and grief and anger and sorrow. Tears and trauma.

Do you recognize any of those? 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 is. Maybe you are, too. Will the center hold? That's our question.

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's experienced it within himself. He also knows that our lives and the world are not defined by or limited to those troubles. What if not letting our hearts be troubled begins with looking into our hearts and seeing and naming what troubles us? That means facing ourselves and our lives, our world. That may be the first and most difficult thing that Jesus asks of us in today's gospel.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I don't want to see it. I don't want to name it. It's too difficult and too painful. It takes me too close to the edge of the abyss and a free fall into a collapsing life, into a collapsing world. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" I don't know what's going on in my life. Why is this happening to me? What direction are you leading me into, O Lord? Thomas speaks for us all. We've lost our center. And how do we re-center? Where do we go when it seems everything is collapsing around us?

Here's the paradox. Sometimes we have to lose our center in order to find it. I want to be clear about this: I am not suggesting that God purposely de-centers us. De-centering happens. It's a part of life, it's a part of the human condition. Sometimes it comes out of circumstances we didn't create or choose. Other times it is the consequences of our choices and actions. Regardless,

Jesus says that it is not a place to stay or a way to live. It's not the life he lives or offers us. If your heart is troubled, then it's time to re-center.

Re-centering doesn't mean our hearts won't be troubled. It doesn't necessarily fix the problem. Whatever it might be, it means that our lives are tethered to something greater than ourselves. It means that our hearts are held secure by the divine life. And we are not free falling into the abyss, because God is with us. God has enfolded us. God has liberated you and me. Hallelujah!

Jesus is reminding us that there is a center and it is not us. It is not America and her laws and constitution. It is not the church and her creeds and doctrines. It is not our success. It is not our accomplishments. It is not our position or power. We do not have to be the center, nor do we need to establish it. In fact, we can't. Instead, we awaken to it. We already know the way to the place of this center, Jesus says.

"Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Or, in the NIV, "And that will be enough." Philip says to Jesus this question. He's bought into the lie that the father is apart from, outside of, and distant from himself. The center, however, is within. The father's house is within. The kingdom is within. Wherever you go, there is the center. Whatever you face, there is the center. Whoever you are, there is the center. Regardless of what troubles, there is the center. Wherever you are, there is the center. Not because you are the center, but because God is within. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, there is no longer a stone that can bind us and that could shackle us. There is a God that liberates us. A God that presents God's self in us, in everything we do and say. And that is the witness of the church. Lord, show us the father. Show us your presence.

The good news is this God is with you, within you, and that God is the center. In the language of today's gospel, the center is the father's house, and there are many dwelling places in this house. The father's house has a dwelling place for every troubled heart. I am not talking about the afterlife, and I am not thinking of this as some sort of celestial dormitory for those who have enough right belief and right behavior. Hear me out. I am talking about the dwelling places as the ways God's life intersects with our own: Mercy and forgiveness. Justice and generosity. Compassion, healing, love. Beauty, wisdom, hope, courage, joy and intimacy. 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 take up residence in the father's presence.

What in you today needs re-centering?

In my father's house there are many dwelling places. How might centeredness, balance and harmony within yourself help you see and respond to your troubles or the troubles of the world differently? In my father's house there are many dwelling places. What if, in the midst of troubles, your heart could maintain a normal rhythm and beat with God's life? In my father's house, there are many dwellings.

Re-centering won't eliminate the virus, won't bring back the loved ones that we have lost. It will not satisfy everyone's needs. It won't take away our worries or fix our problems, whatever they might be.

Friends, I am assured that we are not here this morning simply to fulfill a family tradition or sit in our favorite benches or participate in some form of worship. I believe in God's Providence and grace that the reason why we are here is because we need to hear a word. We need to know that in the midst of our troubled hearts, there is One that listens, and there is One that deserves our praise.

Re-centering means loving our neighbor as ourselves, valuing the needs and the hopes and concerns of others as much as our own. Being gentle with ourselves and others forgiving "not seven, but seventy times seven," whether it's ourselves or another. Re-centering how what to hold on to and what to let go of. Re-centering connects us to the abundant life.

I love the Gospel of John because the Gospel of John reiterates a number of I Am statements. We heard it today, "I am the way, the truth and the life." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the open door." "I am the great I Am." A personal Lord, one that touches our lives, one that's in us, and that provides the substance of our centering.

Therefore, Church of Christ, may you continue to bless the world, for God has blessed you. May you continue to be creative and to see the opportunities that lay before us in this endemic time. In moments where our hearts are troubled, may we also see by faith the troubled hearts of those in our community. May we always recognize that it is not up to us to create the center, for God is already the center.

May the people of Christ bear witness to the love that emanates from our lives, because the one who has been resurrected is in us with us, centers us, guides us, leads us, empowers us through talents and gifts to be the all mighty Church of God that forgives and that embraces, that loves, and that endures.

People of God, rejoice. Do not let your hearts be troubled, for the Lord is with you.