

Fifth Sunday of Easter Monday May 10, 2020

Acts 7:55-60, John 14:1-14

Two weeks ago, we talked about how Christians were known early on as People of the Way. The word, way, here meant road or path.

Keeping that in mind, what then are we to make of this encounter between Jesus and the apostles. Here too we have this language of the way. It starts with Jesus talking about how his Father's household has many places to dwell and that Jesus is going to prepare a place for us and will come back and take hold of us (the language is to grab aggressively) and pull us, move us, to himself so that we might be where he is. Then he says to the disciples, "You know the way to the place I am going." And Thomas, bold as usual, speaks up, "Uh, what way? We don't know where you are going."

Jesus' response? "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

You can almost see Thomas cock his head and look at Jesus. It's like this. I know one phrase of German. "Ich bin der Bleistift". I am the pencil. Imagine if you had asked me where the pencil was and I said that to you, "Ich bin der Bleistift". I am the pencil. I imagine you'd give me a pretty strange look as well.

What's going on here?

I think the Rev. Mark Davis has the right of it, "Jesus' frustration with Thomas and Philip is that they keep asking about the way the truth and the life as if the way the truth and the life were something other than the very Jesus standing before them. I think this same dynamic is at work in Jesus' conversation with Martha in

John 11 after Lazarus' death, when Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." Perhaps at the heart of all of John's "I am" statements is this insistence that Jesus really is the way, the truth, the life, the resurrection, the bread of life, the gate to the sheepfold, etc., not that he tells us about those things."

To put it another way, Thomas and Philip are both looking for the road- the way- directions, plans, guides, maps. Concrete things that tell you to go here, turn this way, do that thing.

They look past Jesus for these things and Jesus is left standing there, "Hello! The way! Right here!"

So, what if the way is about a relationship, a person, not a set of rules, or propositions, or doctrines? What if the way is a whole lot messier and a whole lot more powerful than that?

Jesus does not show us the way. Jesus IS the way, the truth, and the life.

As human beings, we like the definite and concrete. Self help books continue to be a large part of book sales. Do these things to better your life. We have google maps and various gps devices and apps to help us get around. We want to know what the weather is going to be tomorrow and week from tomorrow. We plan our lives out even years in advance. We like having a way... a concrete path or plan for us to travel.

You see this desire in advertising- from the titles for Youtube videos, to books, to finances, to what products to buy, what catches our attention?- Top 10 things to look for in a new car, Top 5 things to get a flatter stomach, Top 3 things to avoid when picking a mate.

It shows up in our faith as well. I've bookmarked articles, like- 7 shifts churches need to make because of Covid-19, 8 assumptions pastors can't make anymore, 3 ways to grow in your faith.

But what if the way, the truth, the life is not to be found in a plan. In three easy steps. In a set of propositions. What if the way, the truth, the life is found in Jesus. In relationship with him.

Suddenly, things are a whole lot easier and a whole lot harder. Easier, because we know about relationships. It is in relationships that you learn about a person, that you learn from a person, not in some straight line, "I'm teaching you something now" kind of way, but through the little things they tell you. Watching how they approach things as mundane as cooking, cleaning, driving their car. All of these tell you something about them, about who they are and what they value. Anyone in a family can tell you this. It's how parents know their children and vice versa. You're around them to pick up on these things.

Any craftsman from a farmer, to a woodworker, to a painter will talk about this kind of relationship with the land, their tools, the paint. Through the years they have gotten to know just how that patch of land produces more. That this tool tends to cut to the left. That these colors will pop more when applied with that brush.

They learned these things not through instructions, a road map, but by being in relationship with the land, their tools, the paint. Over time, intimately.

In many ways this kind of learning is easier because it is so natural. We do it with all kinds of people and things.

It's harder, because it means an investment in time in that relationship with Jesus. Harder, because it means that there will not always be that simple response in any given situation. Just do this thing. Do you remember back in the 90's when the WWJD movement was big? What would Jesus do?

While there are general things we know Jesus embodied in his life and teaching what that really gives us is Jesus' bias. His bias towards forgiveness, towards love – even for those who would kill him, his bias towards healing, feeding, acceptance.

But, he also corrected- sometimes pretty bluntly. He condemned at times. As one meme reminds us “If someone asks What Would Jesus Do, remind them that flipping over tables and chasing people with a whip is in the realm of possibility.” Just look at John 2.

What, then, would Jesus do in any given situation? It can be hard to figure out.

I don't know about you- but the road map is easier. Three things to do. Five steps to take. But even as I have used this kind of language (because it is what grabs people's attention) I must admit I have always been suspicious of it.

Because, and I think we all know this deep down, these kinds of things destroy all nuance. Because then we focus on the list and not on Jesus. And we wind up like Thomas, looking past Jesus.

And what good will the list do us when we are facing a crowd, like Stephen- stones in their hands and ready to kill? What good will a road map do when we are on unfamiliar terrain- like now?

In these moments, we don't need the 10 Commandment, or WWJD, or the three keys to loving Jesus better. What we need, is Jesus. The Jesus who knows what it means to be vulnerable- even to death. Who knows what it means to grieve. What it means to be in pain. The Jesus who can model for us what it means to trust even when we cannot clearly see the future.

We need Jesus- to come and wrap his arms around us. We need to see the risen Jesus- standing at the right hand of God. We need Jesus- who is our rock, our castle, our stronghold and when we rest in him nothing in this world can touch us. Because Jesus saves us.

We need Jesus, because we can't get to where Jesus is, we can't go where Jesus goes by following the 10 commandments, or WWJD. The only way we can truly be where Jesus is- is if he comes and lays hold of us and pulls us close. Then we can't help but be where Jesus is. We can't help but do what Jesus would do because we are both in the same place, because he holds us to himself. Only Jesus can do that- not some list.

The good news of God is not five easy steps. It's not the Ten Commandments. It's not having right doctrine.

The good news of God to us is Jesus. God's visible and knowable self-expression to the humanity God has been trying so hard to love back into relationship since we first screwed it up. God's good news to us is the one who has gone ahead of us through suffering, death, and resurrection and who has grabbed hold of us and pulled us to himself so that we are where he is right now- resurrected, free from the fear of death.

And that, that will save me. That is more comforting to me than any roadmap or plan. Just like having my mother's arms around me is more comforting than just speaking about it.

So, I give thanks for Thomas, who speaks what all of us were thinking. What way? And I pray that we would all be granted more wisdom than he to see that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. And to relax, let go of our maps/plans/steps, and lean into the embrace of Jesus who grabs us and never lets us go and carries us to the place that we need to be. A place of truth and life- because Jesus is there. A place of resurrection- because Jesus is there. A place for all of us who have been claimed and redeemed. And because Jesus, the one who has grabbed hold of us- the way, the truth, the life- is there... so are we.

Thanks be to God.