

May 7, 2023
John 14:1-14

Easter 5
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“The Troubles I’ve Seen”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

“Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen; nobody knows my sorrow.”

We are often surprised when we learn that people who appear to be living charmed lives reveal the difficulties and challenges that lurk below their cheerful surface. Many of us have been taught to “put on a happy face,” to put on a proverbial mask before we go out in public, to keep a “stiff upper lip” and to “always look on the bright side of life.” For people who are experiencing grief, trauma, depression, and feelings of worthlessness and anxiety, it may appear that they are alone in their troubles, since everyone around them seems to be sailing through life without any problems. But when people feel comfortable to remove their masks and facades, we often discover that other people are experiencing the same challenges and dealing with traumatic memories and psychological pain as profound as ours. In the words of a popular song, “*when you think you’ve had too much of this life, hang on – ‘cause everybody hurts sometimes.*” (R.E.M.).

When we do get up the courage to share our troubles and sorrows with another person, we often discover that they either dismiss what we are experiencing (“*But you have so much to be thankful for?*”) or they seek to offer words of encouragement that can do more harm than good (“*Don’t worry; the sun will come up tomorrow!*”). Anyone who has experienced well-meaning persons whose words do more harm than good may wonder what Jesus means when he says to his disciples “*do not let your hearts be troubled.*” (John 14:1). These words are at the beginning of the Farewell Discourse, an extended section in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus speaks his parting words to his disciples before his passion and death. While they offer words of instruction and encouragement, we may wonder how Jesus can urge his followers to not be troubled at the moment they learn that within hours the man they have left everything behind to follow will be dead. They are still dealing with the shock and grief that we experience when we learn about a person’s death, or when someone tells us that a loved one has entered hospice. How can Jesus, of all people, tell his followers to not be troubled when anyone would be deeply disturbed at what is happening at this moment?

We can understand Jesus' intention at this moment with his disciples by going back to Louis Armstrong's song: "*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen; nobody knows but Jesus.*" This is not the first time "troubled" (*tarasso*) has appeared in John's Gospel; it has been used three times previously, in each case describing Jesus' moments of trouble and his condition of distress:

- "When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." – 11:33.
- "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour." – 12:27.
- "After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'" – 13:21.

In these three uses, the verb refers primarily to Jesus' agitation and disturbance in the face of the power of death and evil, not simply to his sadness. Jesus does not speak to the disciples' personal sadness at his death, but instead exhorts them to stand firm in the face of his departure, when the events may look to them as if evil and death are having its way. Rather than dismissing their pain and sorrow at the news of his impending death, Jesus' words are a rallying cry for strength from one who knows the troubles they have seen because he has experienced such troubles himself, and is about to put an end to the tyranny of the forces of "sin, death, and the power of the devil" through his death and resurrection.

Jesus can encourage his disciples to "*not let your hearts be troubled*" by including two additional imperatives in his farewell address: "*Believe in God, believe also in me.*" These words build on the Christological core of Jesus' ministry in the Fourth Gospel, the unity of Jesus and God ("*The Father and I are one.*" – 10:30). The disciples' faith in the relationship of God and Jesus will empower them to rejoice in the events of Jesus' hour, his suffering and death on the cross, because through the eyes of faith they will recognize Jesus' hour as the culmination of his enactment of God's work, as the defeat of the ruler of this world ("*Now is the judgment of his world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*" – 12:31-32).

Jesus follows his opening words of exhortation with a promise that "*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?*" (14:2). "Father's house" is an Old Testament image for the heavenly dwelling, often represented by the tabernacle and Temple:

- “Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?” – Isaiah 66:1.
- “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens?” – Psalm 123:1.
- “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.” – Psalm 84:1-2.

While Jesus is aware of this understanding of “my Father’s house” among his followers, here he is referring not so much to a physical dwelling as a relationship; the “Father’s house” is not “*so much a place as the divine communion of life and love in which we share through the glorified humanity of Jesus*” (Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV). It is in this relationship in the presence of the Lord who dwells among God’s people that there will be “*many dwelling places*” for those who are in Christ Jesus, who promises that “*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.*” (14:3). Jesus’ return will be the enactment of the eschatological announcement to Martha as she and her sister Mary mourn the death of their brother Lazarus: “*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*” (11:25-26). It is the ultimate witness to the power of God over life and death; Jesus’ return announces that nothing, not even death, can separate Jesus and “his own” from God. Jesus’ promises to return to his disciples “*thus functions as the seal of the new eschatological reality ushered in by the events of his hour*” (Gail O’Day). Jesus’ understanding of “my Father’s house” as a relationship promises the disciples a share in Jesus’ relationship with God.

The disciples’ initial reaction is one of confusion; we can understand that they are still struggling to process the imminence of Jesus’ death and his teaching that he will come again and gather his followers into his Father’s house. After announcing that “*you know the way to the place where I am going,*” Thomas speaks for the group when he asks Jesus “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” (14:4-5). Thomas does not understand the shift in Jesus’ words; he interprets “the way” and “where I am going” as synonyms, both pointing to Jesus’ destination. But “the way” (*he hodos*) is not a geographical term, but a description of the revelatory work of Jesus. While the term can serve as an understanding of an actual road or way, *hodos* can also mean a journey or trip; it can also represent a “way of life” that connotes behavior. In the Acts of the Apostles, the early followers of Jesus called themselves “people of the Way” long before they were known as

“Christians” (“... so that if [Saul] found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” – Acts 9:2). To know “the way” that Jesus is going means to follow our Lord in the path of discipleship, a relationship with God and Jesus that offers “*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.*” Jesus responds to Thomas and his disciples with another of his “I am” statements that reveal essential elements of his identity and the relationship he establishes with his followers: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” (14:6). Jesus reveals himself to be simultaneously the access to and the embodiment of life with God. Jesus is not inviting his disciples to follow him in a way that signifies a physical journey; he is the Way through which people come into relationship with God. To recognize Jesus as the “truth” (*aletheia*) is to affirm that as the “*Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*” (1:14), Jesus makes the truth of God available to the world (“*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.*” – 1:18). It is to acknowledge that one’s relationship with Jesus is a relationship with the liberating truth of God (“*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*” – 8:31-32), that Jesus’ life and ministry is the ultimate witness to God’s truth (“*For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.*” – 18:37). “*Jesus is ‘the way,’ the promise of the possibility of unity with God, because in him one meets the truth of God.*” (Gail O’Day).

The one who is the “way” and the “truth” is also the “life”; as Jesus proclaimed himself to be the “*resurrection and the life*” (11:25), this saying claims God’s life-giving powers for Jesus. Jesus is “life” because Jesus brings God’s gift of life to the world:

- “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” – 1:4.
- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” – 3:16.
- “Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes.” – 5:21.

Jesus is “the way” because he is the access point to God’s promise of life; “*only he has come down from heaven and only he can lift humanity up to share in the divine communion, which he as the Son has enjoyed from all eternity.*” (Martin and Wright). Jesus identifies himself as the means through which people have access to the eternal life that exists in relationship with God: “*No one comes to the Father except through*

me.” While this has often been taken out of context to exploit Christianity as superior to other religions (often for purposes other than what our Lord intended), for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord it means renouncing allegiances to any other gods or forces that would seek to draw us away from God; as Peter confessed when many disciples had abandoned Jesus, “*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*” (6:68-69). The heart of the good news in the Fourth Gospel is that in Jesus, the incarnate Word, the Son of God, one can see and know God in a manner never before possible.

- “For I am the one who myself built the way or path, and I myself have trodden it and passed across, so that I might bring you and all who cling to me across. But you must first put your trust in me, nothing doubting, must venture all on me, and with a joyous heart go and die confidently in my name.” – Martin Luther.

There is still confusion among the disciples, as Philip shows that he does not understand the nature of Jesus’ self-revelation, that the incarnation is the ultimate revelation of God, when he requests that Jesus “*show us the Father, and we will be satisfied*” (14:8). In his response, Jesus shows that he can offer nothing more than he has already made available to Philip and the others: “*Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*” (14:9). Jesus’ words and works offer corroborating witness to God’s presence in him: “*If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe in me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.*” (10:37-38). In the end, the decisive question is whether Philip and the disciples believe in Jesus as the tangible, incarnate presence of God. The repetition of “believe” (*pisteuo*) shifts the focus from Jesus’ revelation of God to the disciples’ acceptance of it:

- “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if not, then believe me because of the works themselves.” – 14:10-11.

All of Jesus’ words and works serve to lead people to believe and see the relationship between that Father and Son revealed in them.

Jesus signals the beginning of a new saying with the familiar phrase “*very truly, I tell you*” in which he focuses on ways in which believing in Jesus empowers the believing community: “*the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*” (14:12). The disciples’ works will be Jesus’ works in the same way that Jesus’ works are God’s (“*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*” – 17:18). For the disciples to share in Jesus’ works is for them to share in the revealing of God in the world. The success of the disciples’ works is directly dependent on Jesus’ departure to the Father; their works, which will be done after the events of Jesus’ hour, are therefore greater because they will reveal the completed story of the Word made flesh and hence the fullness of God’s love. “*As such, they continue the glorification of God through Jesus that was the purpose of Jesus’ own works: ‘I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do’ (17:4).*” (O’Day). As the works of God will be performed by the disciples spiritually united to the risen Jesus, their works will indeed be “greater.” Prayers offered in Jesus’ name, in union with him, are offered in perfect obedience to the Father’s will as Jesus was perfectly obedience to the will of God; therefore, “*if in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*” (14:14).

- “Our greater works must exhibit the way, the truth, and the life for communities that continue to be disconnected and denied access to all of the areas that can bring abundant life such as quality food, access to medical care, affordable housing, and continued dignity no matter what their identities are. That is the way, the truth, and the life for a collective people with a singular heart.” – Angela N. Parker.

This text is frequently read at funerals, addressed to people who are deeply troubled and grieving the death of a loved one, walking through the “*valley of the shadow of death,*” suffering profound sorrow and wondering how they will live on now that the one with whom their shared life and love is gone from their sight. Jesus’ encouragement that we should “*not let your hearts be troubled*” does not mean that we should not feel sorrow and pain when we experience the death of one who is dear to us; in fact, our Lord himself wept with those who mourned the death of Lazarus in Bethany. Jesus can encourage us to not be troubled even in the face of death because Jesus knows the troubles we’ve seen because he has experienced them himself. He has witnessed how sin, death, and the power of the devil have separated people from God’s steadfast love and the abundant life that are God’s Will for all people. In his suffering and death on the Cross, Jesus has destroyed the power of death that seeks to deny us the fullness of God’s presence and abiding love; as the curtain of the temple was torn at the moment of Jesus’ death, so our Lord died and

rose again so that nothing – not even death – will separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus knows the troubles we've seen; our Lord knows our every weakness because he has experience them for himself, for *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* (Hebrews 4:15-16). Our Lord Jesus Christ knows about the challenges of human existence and is present to comfort us and strengthen us in our hours of doubt, anxiety, trauma, and distress, walking with us as a source of comfort and hope all the days of our life even as he assures us that the day will come when he will gather us into our eternal home, fulfilling the promise that as *“surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”* (Psalm 23:6).

“Nobody knows the troubles I've seen; nobody knows but Jesus – Glory, Hallelujah!”

Our lives may be filled with pain, doubt, anxiety, and distress – but we need never hide them behind a mask or pretend that they do not burden us. Because *“Jesus knows our every weakness”* because he has also experienced all of life's troubles and distress, we can take *“everything to God in prayer,”* knowing that the God who has been *“our help in ages past”* will be *“our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.”* Amen.