

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 7, 2023

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

on

John 14:1-14

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A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2023

A wealthy man died and went to heaven. He was met at the Pearly Gates by Saint Peter who led him down the streets of gold. They passed mansion after mansion until they came to the very end of the street. Saint Peter stopped the rich man in front of a little shack. "This belongs to you," said Saint Peter. "Why do I get this ugly thing when there are so many mansions I could live in?" the man demanded. "We did the best we could with the money you sent us!" Saint Peter replied.

In his book on the Eucharist, the great mystic Thomas Merton says this: *"In receiving Communion, it is not sufficient merely to perform a soulless, external action... We are familiar with the fact that Christ 'comes to us' in Communion, but we forget the far more important aspect of this great mystery: in order for him to come to us, we must 'come to him', we must allow ourselves 'to be drawn to him' by the Father."*¹

After his Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples in an upper room. In our Gospel reading today, in Eastertide, we go back in time to the upper room on the night the Lord was betrayed and arrested. We look back to that night through the lens, as it were, of the Resurrection. Let's begin by placing today's Gospel passage in context.

The scene is set with these powerful words, *"Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him."*²

Just pause for a moment. The author of the Fourth Gospel tells us that all that is to follow is characterized by the Passover – that feast of liberation from slavery to freedom – the greatest story in all of salvation history. Then, we are told that Jesus will reveal his love by loving his disciples **to the end**. Lastly, there is a cosmic war about to take place for the Devil will enter the heart of Judas and turn him against the King of love. So, when Jesus says "do not let your heart be troubled" I believe that he is not simply asking the disciples to be calm and have nice thoughts; once the scene is set, four things happen in quick succession:

First, Jesus astonishes his disciples by washing their feet – including the feet of Judas. Secondly, Jesus is 'troubled in his spirit' and foretells his betrayal by Judas, and Judas leaves the room. At this point John heightens the drama with the words, *"and it was night."* Thirdly, once Judas had left, Jesus gives the remaining disciples a new commandment to love one another. As Jesus gives his new commandment, he uses the word **glory** *five* times and the word **love** *four* times in those few sentences; it is as if John really wants to make sure we have heard the Lord. Finally, Jesus predicts Peter's denial of him. Peter has offered to give up his life for Jesus, but Jesus says *"Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times."*

Immediately after those words, we begin today's Gospel reading and perhaps we understand why Jesus is so troubled in spirit. His first words to the disciples are, "Do not let your heart be troubled." Interestingly, in modern translations, Jesus says "do not let your hearts (plural) be troubled," but the Greek is singular. Some commentators have suggested that the author of the Fourth Gospel has Jesus speaking not just to the individual disciples but, rather, to the Church – his Body and, therefore, to you and to me. After all, in his new commandment, Jesus had said, *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

So now we understand the context of this passage, we can begin to understand why the disciples are also troubled and question Jesus. Our patron, Saint Thomas, is exasperated; Peter had asked Jesus where he was going and Jesus had given him a cryptic answer, *"Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward."* Now Thomas protests, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* And as Jesus had encouraged the sister of Lazarus by saying *"I am the Resurrection and the Life,"* he now encourages *all* of his followers with these words, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* I find it poignant that the early Christians were called 'followers of the way' – for to be like Jesus is to walk his path; to discover his truth; and to live life in all its fullness.

Philip asks Jesus to *"Show us the Father"* and Jesus gently says *"Have I been with you all this time Philip and you still do not know me? To have seen me is to have seen the Father."*

In the early Church the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist was understood as one and the same as the real presence of Christ in the Community of Faith – not called 'the Church' but *the Mystical Body of Christ*. In his book in the Eucharist, Merton goes on to say *"If we do not love one another, we cannot eat the Bread of Life, we cannot come to the Father. It is only by loving one another that we allow the Father to draw us to Christ, for it is by love that we become one Mystical Body, one Christ."*³

In this season of Easter, my friends, we are once again being invited to be enfolded in the Father's love by discovering the truth of the Resurrection and living that truth in our everyday lives; if you will, by interpreting our lives through the lens of the Resurrection. As Merton says, *"in order for him to come to us, we must 'come to him', we must allow ourselves 'to be drawn to him' by the Father."* Just as the Emmaus disciples' hearts burned within them as Jesus talked to them on the road, so like them, our eyes of faith need to be opened to discover the presence of Jesus in the breaking of the bread once again; to be drawn by Jesus to the Father's love through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and to put into practice the commandment to love one another just as Jesus loved us to the end.

The words of George Herbert that we sang before the Gospel reading:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
Such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
Such a Light as shows a feast:
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joyes in love.

¹ Thomas Merton, 'The Living Bread' p.84

² See John Chapter 13 to set the context of the Gospel Reading for the day.

³ Living Bread p.89