

Sermon: Words of Comfort

Year A, Easter 5

[Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14](#)

Offered May 14, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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Do not let your hearts be troubled. (John 14:1). What can keep our hearts from being troubled? Doesn't the world give us a list? Health and beauty products in such abundance that we have to look stuff up on the internet to find out where that body part is, let alone if we want it improved. Food to help us stay slim; food to comfort even as it expands our waistlines. Cars, vacations, homes that maybe we can't really afford but we can buy because someone is willing to loan us ridiculous amounts of money. We buy insurance for our toasters so our hearts won't be troubled. We have our phones with us at all times so our hearts are never troubled by missing a call. And then most of us, no matter how wealthy or chilled out we are, do something that is guaranteed to trouble our hearts. We seek it out. We have kids.

I have friends whose kid was accepted into the Quaker school in Cambridge. So the dad, fully admitting it was crazy, called Phillips Academy, Andover to confirm that his six year old would not be disadvantaged in her application that she might submit 9 years later because the Quaker school didn't give kids grades on their class work. It's crazy what we do for our children. But we do it because we don't want their hearts to be troubled.

Jesus doesn't want his disciples to be troubled either. Today's reading is full of words of comfort. That's why we use it often during funerals. Remember that in John the order of events in Jesus' life is slightly different. Just before this reading, Lazarus was raised from the dead. It is performing that miracle that gets Jesus in fatal trouble with the authorities in Jerusalem. Lazarus joins the disciples for a meal with Jesus, which turns out to be his Last Supper. Judas leaves that meal to betray Jesus. Peter promises not to abandon Jesus, no matter what. But Jesus sees what is coming. So he offers his goodbye to his disciples. He offers them words of comfort, even if they don't completely understand them.

Jesus is trying to reassure his followers that having committed themselves to follow him, to be disciples of The Way, they will never be parted from him. But death follows life. Death is the inevitable consequence of the blessing of life. If they believe death ends the relationship, they need to pick up their chins and look beyond death to what comes next – the Resurrection. And beyond the Resurrection is the Ascension. When Jesus speaks of the dwelling places, the abiding places, he is speaking of the true final step, not this life, not death, not the resurrected life, but the ascended life. When we will all abide with God.

When Philip asks Jesus about seeing the Father, Jesus returns to the same theme. God dwells in Jesus, Jesus dwells in God. Don't take this life as the end point. But use this life to build your belief in the true end point, the Ascension. For a moment, think of one of your kids or one of your parents. Don't care which, but have a particular person in mind, dead or alive. In your mind's eye, go to a craft fair, or the state fair, or a nice restaurant with a variety of interesting dishes. Can you find something there, that does nothing for you but you know that they would love? A cool little hand tool that does exactly one thing, but does it perfectly. A silk scarf that they would wear all the time. A combination of walnuts and maple syrup that they would flip out over. You're indifferent to whatever it is, but they would love it. That belief that they would

love something arises because they abide in you. It isn't what you love. You love them enough to know what they would love.

God took on flesh and dwelt among us, so we could abide in God's love in this life. Jesus calls his disciples to witness that love both by sharing with everyone that they have experienced it and by sharing that love themselves with everyone else. It is that multiplier effect that makes their works greater than Jesus'. And it is kind of him to offer them, and us, that credit.

Because we are people with troubled hearts. We tend to only look at this world and this life. Death is where it ends. We find it hard to pick up our chins and see beyond death to resurrected life and beyond that to ascended life. The reading from 1 Peter acknowledges that. We were called out of darkness, we have stumbled, we have disobeyed. But 1 Peter is also a reading of comfort, because it assures us that it is not what we have done, not what we have been, but what we are becoming that matters. We are building the spiritual house of God here on earth by becoming the living stones and the holy priesthood.¹

On this Mother's Day, I want to acknowledge that not all of our mothers have eased our troubled hearts. For whatever limitations or abuse they suffered, they ended up troubling our hearts far more than if they had just left us alone. Or sometimes, it was just a bad combination of mother and kid. Both were fine on their own, but troubling when taken together. That's why speaking of God as a father or mother can be problematic. Because so many of us had parents that damaged us through that relationship, they did not nurture us. The idea of going from this life into the next, through death and resurrection into ascension and ending up abiding in a love that has been destructive for us on this earth is not a comforting one.

So let me offer this image. Jesus is promising his disciples that their relationship will not end. Death does not get the last word, nor is it an everlasting word.² In our ascended life, God is not outside of time. Rather God has all the time God needs for us. As you think of your own children, no matter how smoothly or roughly the relationship is flowing, all of you have spoken of wanting to have more time, more quality time with them. God is promising to have all the time there is for us.³ God is promising, moreover, to have all the time there is for our kids. When we are no longer in this world, God will be loving our children. And we will be loving our children still, because we will be abiding with God. For most of us, that is what we would ask God and Jesus for: that our children's hearts would never be troubled.

¹ Archibald M. Hunter, "The First Epistle of Peter: Introduction," vol. 12 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1957), 84-85.

² Shannon Michael Pater, "Fifth Sunday of Easter, Pastoral Perspective, John 14:1-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 268.

³ Cynthia A. Jarvis, "Fifth Sunday of Easter, Homiletical Perspective, John 14:1-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 269.