

ALWAYS ON HOLY GROUND
John 14: 1-14
Fifth Sunday of Easter • May 10, 2020
by Pat Berger

Our reading for today from the Gospel according to John seems, at first, a tiny bit out of place. We are four Sundays after Easter, and these verses from John were likely spoken at that last meal that Jesus ate with his disciples. We are privileged to overhear him as he tells his disciples about how they are to go on with their ministries without him in their midst. The incarnation will end; they will not see him anymore. He has told them about what he and they know lies ahead: he will be crucified, he will be resurrected, and then there is more: then he will ascend to that place where he goes to prepare a place for each of them, and for each of us.

These are verses that we often hear at a memorial service; what we need to remember now is that these words are not only about life after death, but also words for our lives right here and now, as they were for the disciples all those years ago. In chapter 13, John began to tell of that last supper that Jesus had with his disciples. Jesus washed their feet, and explained what that meant. He foretold Jesus' betrayal by Judas, and Judas left the gathering. Jesus told them that he would be with them only a bit longer, and that where he was going they could not come. He foretold Peter's denial. In chapters 14 through 17, then, we have what is likely John's summation of all of Jesus' last teachings.

It is no wonder to us that those disciples' hearts were troubled! Surely the ground would seem to have been shifting under their feet. (And in the past few weeks, we might feel as if we can relate . . .) They had thought that Jesus was the one to change their lives, to change everyone's lives, and now they had to say good-bye. Jesus needed to be pastor in this setting, and friend. He needed for the disciples to remember, and to act on, these words. He knew what was to come, for himself and for them. And so he said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

He was not abandoning them; he was returning to God, to his Father, and, he assured them, this was to be their destination also. There were many rooms in this dwelling, and Jesus was going to prepare a place for them. They would live with him, in relationship with God as he was. The Greek word here for "dwelling" does not mean a dwelling like a house; it means a place like an inn or a tent (I prefer the inn image), where one might spend some time on one's way to . . . well, on one's way to this ministry, this life to which Jesus was commissioning each of them. These verses were not threat; they were promises for their new lives. The thing is, Jesus might have said to them, while they were adjusting to his absence, he was not absent. And neither was God. And this space that Jesus was preparing: the

disciples did not need to wait for it until after they had died, and neither do we. The disciples would be where Jesus and God are, always, and there we will be also, always. Always, we are on holy ground. "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

We need to remember, Karoline Lewis wrote, that these words of Jesus according to John, ". . . never anticipated being Scripture, . . . They are first and foremost words of comfort and hope. . . . Words meant to remind and affirm. Yes, things will never be the same. . . . Yet goodbyes do not erase the past, in fact, goodbyes call to mind the past so that a future is possible. . . ."

Well, all of that ought to have been perfectly easy for the disciples to understand, don't you think? Or, maybe not. Thomas, at least, still had a question. Speaking as if for the group, he allowed that they had no idea where Jesus was going, and as a result, no idea as to how to get there. To which Jesus responded, in an effort to give them all another clue about the holy ground on which they stood, "I AM the way, and the truth, and the life." Oh, now they got it . . . or maybe not.

One commentator wrote that the I AM statements in John, some of which we heard last week, ". . . make known Jesus as the source of life, abundant grace, and [when] seen in connection with the absolute "I AM" statements, signal the very presence of God." Each one of these I AMs tells about God who is in Jesus and who is at work in and through Jesus. Here, Jesus would seem to be telling the disciples that they didn't need to worry about what needed to be done in the ministry, or how it needed to be done; he would handle those details, even when they could no longer see him. It wasn't to be their concern as to who was in or who was not, whether this was the right way to believe or that was -- those would be God's concerns in Jesus. "You know me and I know you," Jesus said; act accordingly. If they would simply do what was asked of them, minister as Jesus had, in love, and be generous with their love rather than stingy -- well, God would take care of the rest of it. God had been doing that while Jesus was with them, and God would continue after Jesus had ascended. They stood, indeed, on holy ground. "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

The result, for the disciples then and for disciples today, was and is the capacity to do things even greater than what Jesus had done, because, Jesus said, "I am going to the Father." We stand on holy ground; those who believe and who pray in Jesus' name will do great things. This promise is made to the community -- the verb is plural: it is not aimed at individuals; we will do great things.

In these past few weeks, it does seem as if some things on this holy ground have shifted. It seemed to happen fast; there wasn't time to get used to the fact that life was changing. The day that the oncologist told me that he didn't want me volunteering in the schools for a bit, and to stay away from my grandchildren -- I thought he was being professionally cautious. The very next day, the governor

closed the schools! And the Presbytery decided we ought not to be worshipping in our sanctuaries. Holy ground had, indeed, shifted. More than ever, we needed to donate food and money to food banks, and, by the way: do you know how to make masks? The questions changed, and the needs became greater.

It is difficult for us to imagine doing greater works than Jesus did; maybe that is because we only think of doing them in the same way that Jesus did. Rather, Jesus promises to be with us, working in us and through us to accomplish God's work in the world. As each of us was created, God had an idea, an idea of who each of us might be, of what each of us and all of us together might accomplish for the Kingdom. I think about the check for \$419.33 that is going to the Columbia Pacific Food Bank from Plymouth because a couple of people got a grant request to the Presbytery filled out really fast. Now, \$419.33 is not a whole lot of money -- but when you think that 29 churches applied for those grants and each received \$419.33: our Presbytery has fed more than a few hungry people! We are doing work for God! My understanding is that another amount of grant money will be coming this way before long; it will be fun to see what God's people here determine to do with that! And that is just some of what happens through this group of people, the people who are Plymouth, as they stand on holy ground. "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

Each one of us has ministries of our own that we see to, also. Things that you do in your community, in your neighborhood, in your own home. Maybe you had the opportunity to be helpful to a neighbor or a friend or a family member this week -- or maybe to all of those! Maybe it was a week when someone or more than one someone was able to be helpful to you. Do any of these things change the history of our world? Maybe. Do they grow the Kingdom? Certainly! This is the life for which Jesus commissioned His disciples then, and the life for which he continues to commission disciples today. After all, "Very truly, I tell you, 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." Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.