



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 10, 2020

ACTS 7:55-60; PSALM 31:1-5,15-16; 1 PETER 2:2-10; JOHN 14:1-14

GOD'S ECOSYSTEM



John 14:1-14 [Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? And 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 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 you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

The professor was a man of few words. He was a plant biologist and department chair

but kept his office in the basement of the science building, adjacent to the greenhouse.

The plants he studied there and across Sewanee's expansive domain did not demand much discourse, and that suited him just fine.

I recall the first class of a senior level Plant Ecology seminar, when Dr. Ramseur glided into the classroom with not much more than a nod in our direction, mumbled something about wanting to show us a few slides. He dropped a carousel onto the round top of the slide projector that hissed to life with lamp and fan. He reached back to flip the classroom lights off, and ran through a few black and white, faded and stippled slides of some nondescript grassy field. Not inclined to loquacious explanation, we did not understand what we were looking at or the professor's intent in showing these dingy slides to us.

The next class began the same way—a few decrepit slides of some meadow. We thought surely he could gather some slides of better quality. Each class began the same way—a few slides, over time transitioning to color and the images were brighter and busier with sumac's scarlet leaves, spindly needles of loblolly pines, and the luscious blooms of wild dogwoods. Several weeks into the class Dr. Ramseur disclosed that we were looking at the same place in western North Carolina where he had completed his doctoral work some three decades earlier.

He was demonstrating the natural phenomenon of ecological succession, and over the course of his slide show we could see the remarkable transformation that had taken place in this simple meadow—from the charred landscape following a forest fire, to a peaceful space with tall grasses, to a thicket of small bushes, to a stand of lanky young pines. And then the slides stopped. He moved onto something else at the start of each class.

Near the end of the term we took a weekend field trip to the Smoky Mountains, where we inspected all sorts of ecosystems, and then on the final day, just before we were to return to Sewanee, he stopped the van on the roadside and said, "Everybody out...let's go see something." He was as excited as I ever saw him. Just off the road, some fifty yards into the forest, we came to the place where he had taken photos for so many years—only it was no longer a meadow, but a stand of beautiful hardwoods now—oaks and hickories, maples and poplars.

We took out our measuring tools, and recorded diameters and densities of the various plant species present—more data for the professor's lifelong study of this little plot of earth—holy ground for Dr. Ramseur who quietly stood off by himself before taking a few more photos to continue the story he would share with students yet to come.

When we returned to class again the next week, he took us through the slide show from the beginning in the 1950s to our trip nearly forty years later, and we saw the connection—the progression—the culmination of a deciduous hardwood forest with dwelling places for so many plants and animals connected to the whole. We'd read about it, of course, but the gift of seeing an ecosystem unfold remains one of the highlights of my liberal arts education.

I've been thinking a lot about ecosystems lately—perhaps it's because of the confluence of a global pandemic, the recent observance of Earth Day 2020, and this cathedral community's commitment to eco-justice as we seek to reduce our carbon footprint. My daily walks have provided space to ponder such things in the midst of our beautiful landscape here.

There is a keen awareness that we are part of a whole—that the entire planet, if you will, might be considered a sort of ecosystem in its own right really—all interconnected.

When Jesus tells his disciples that his Father's house has many dwelling places, it is interesting to note that the Greek word for house here is *oikos*, from which we get "ecos" as in ecology, and ecosystem. God's ecosystem has many dwelling places. An abundance of rooms for all to dwell together.

Perhaps that's as sublime an image of heaven as there is.

Perhaps that as sublime an image of our earthly dwelling place, too.

The ecosystem of God's creation.

We need not think this image offered by Jesus is an extraction from the realities of life here and now.

Jesus speaks these words of truth and encouragement into a roomful of disciples on the night before he will be crucified. They all intuitively know he stands at the precipice, and there is a sense of foreboding. It is a crucible moment that will change everything, and surely the air hangs thick with fear and uncertainty. At best, they have dingy notions of what is unfolding, but no clear picture yet for what it all means—for Jesus or for them. And we eavesdrop on the conversation from our perch, letting the echoes of that exchange tilt our hearts here and now.

Jesus, who is able to frame the prospect of his death within a larger narrative, invites us to do the same, and says do not let your hearts be troubled.

Fat chance, Jesus. Our hearts are troubled.

You can do this, he says... You know the way.

And Thomas speaks for us all his earnest heart-troubled words that arise from a deep

place of anticipatory grief: Lord, how can we know the way?

To which Jesus replies, I am the way.

What we don't hear this morning in the very next verse from John's pivotal 14th chapter is that Jesus assures them of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, that will be with them always, even if the life they have known heretofore is about to change.

Long before people who followed Jesus as the Christ were known as Christians, they were simply known as People of the Way. Pilgrims of a sort, traveling on the way, together.

This is another seminal word for us—The Way—*hodon* is the word here, the common Greek word for road, or path—the sort you

walk on literally. But Jesus lifts it from a flattened meaning and throttles it with spiritual vigor—a dimensionality meant to change everything for these People of the Way. Not just an hour on Sunday morning, but the whole of life. A way of life, a way of being in the world, participants in God's ecosystem in which nothing is lost, no one is lost, and there is a dwelling place for all.

We are pilgrims on the road, making our way, invited to see the world as God's house, an ecosystem of inclusion, invited to take our place in it, and know that the Spirit moves among us as Advocate and Companion on the Way.

Friends, you know the way. Carry on!

https://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/imagegallery/image_feature_1249.html



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