

Today's Gospel reading is most commonly heard at funerals. In fact, if I went back through every funeral I've ever presided over, I'd be willing to bet that over half, if not closer to two thirds or more, have used this excerpt from the Gospel of John over any other passage found in our four Gospels.

These verses are comforting. When we are forced to look death in the face, it's helpful to hear this promise from Jesus that we are not alone. God is with us and God has prepared a place for us when we breathe our last.

But because I'm so used to preaching on this text at funerals...I spent a lot of time pondering what good news these words might be to us when we *aren't* as emotionally raw. What do these promises mean to us when we aren't mourning? What is the Word we need to hear today?

And that got me thinking to what Word the *disciples* needed to hear, needed to remember.

Four weeks ago, we celebrated the resurrection. And then we followed that up with two weeks of post-resurrection appearances—basically, we journeyed with those early followers of Jesus as they processed what happened and began to spread the news.

But the last two weeks? We've kind of gone back in time, haven't we? We're back to hearing things Jesus said *before* his passion while he was teaching. Why is that?

Well, it's partly because there's not *that* many more post-resurrection accounts in our Gospels to pull from—we wouldn't have enough to go the whole season of Easter until Ascension Day on May 18th.

But I also think it's because it's where the disciples and followers of Jesus' mindset was. Yes, Jesus is back and dwelling among them, but there is still a lot to figure out. Where do they go from here? What are the most important things that need to be remembered and shared from Jesus' ministry?

And *that's* why I think these Gospel readings in these weeks of the Easter Season are included. In my mind, it's a window into the psyche of those early followers asking the question "What now? What's next?" and leaning on these snippets for inspiration and guidance.

If I approach the text in this way, I'm left asking these questions for myself and for our community of faith today: "What now? What's next?"

The initial mission and work of the Church was simply to share the story, share the account of Jesus' ministry and teaching and death and resurrection and share how God came to dwell among us and usher in a new way of life. That, for the most part, has been done. There *may* be some tiny region of the world where this message has never been shared, but I am

skeptical. Missionary movements of the past and the current inter-connectedness of our world mean that there are very few individuals who have not heard of Jesus or who have not heard of the basic tenets of Christianity, regardless of what faith tradition, if any, they belong to.

So just getting the story out there is not our “what’s next?”

And attempting to “save souls” or “get converts” shouldn’t really be, either. Christians of the past, as well as the present, have taken on that particular mantle and it has not often been beneficial to those who were being “saved.” Missionary schools in this country and Canada stripped native peoples of their cultural heritage and language in the name of “saving them.” Slave traders and holders used the notion of bondage as a way of “taming” and “saving” people they saw as savages or heathens. Even today, attempts to “save people” often seem more about fear or emotional manipulation than about sharing the freeing, inspiring love of God in a way that genuinely changes lives and reflects the reign of God.

So, siblings in Christ, what is our “next”? Looking at the words of Jesus that have inspired and encouraged believers for two thousand years, what are *we* to do post-resurrection, two thousand years on from those earliest days?

Jesus says, “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.” (John 14:6-7a)

More often than not, we hear this in a very exclusionary way: “Believe in Jesus or you won’t be able to come to the Father!”

But I think it is richer than that, more nuanced than that. God came to us in human form, introduced us to Jesus, so that we might have a new way of relating to and understanding God. Through Jesus, we bear witness to a God who feels sorrow and joy, pain and passion. Through Jesus, through his death and resurrection, we are assured there is nothing we can experience that God is separate from, even death. Through Jesus, God decided to give up the trappings of divinity to be reconciled to us.

And *that* is why no one comes to the Father except through Jesus, because it is by Jesus’ *actions* that we know him, know the Father and Creator, that we know the Holy Spirit.

Phillip and Thomas (and probably most of the other folks listening) are really struggling to understand what Jesus is saying. And so when Philip says to Jesus, “Show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied,” you can almost feel the frustration in Jesus’ response:

“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’? ¹⁰Do 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. ¹¹Believe 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. ¹²Very 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.” (John 14: 9-12)

So, it is knowing Jesus, knowing the Father, knowing *God*, both from experiencing God through the works of God’s own’s self *and* from the works of God lived out through our hands and feet and words. *This* is what’s next, what is our calling as we go into the future.

What’s next for us, fellow disciples of Christ? What shall we do, following the works Jesus did in his time walking this earth?

What’s next? We heal people. Maybe not through miraculous instances that make the blind see, but through supportive care, seeking resources and provisions to enable healing of body and mind and soul. And through caring and cooperative relationships to strengthen community ties and build bridges instead of animosity.

What’s next? We feed people. Both immediately via food pantries and feeding programs, but also through advocacy for ease of access and working to reduce and eliminate food deserts.

What’s next? We clothe and house people. We shelter them from the immediate threat of inclement weather, and also work towards fair and affordable means to get out of debt and find secure accommodations.

What’s next? We speak up for all voices that continue to go unheard, lifting up everyone who has historically been excluded from the larger narrative and paving the way for all who continue to be kept at the margins.

What’s next? We tell people how much they are loved by God, especially those who haven’t heard it before and especially those who have been told that God will only love them if they change.

What’s next?

The details and particulars are as yet unknown, but the goal is the same: to do our part in living out the reign of God in our world today and, through our actions, allowing people to know Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life.

Amen.