

May 10, 2020

Fifth Sunday of Easter

It's Old Ground, Until You Have to Walk it!

John 14:1-6

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Dear Friends in Christ,

I was thinking that probably a number of you are thinking, “We’ve heard this text plenty of times over the years.” Well, we have; not just for a Sunday sermon, but for funeral services, as well.

In 1927, David Miller wrote what is called “An old American traditional gospel folk song” entitled “Lonesome Valley.” If you can recall any of the lyrics, well, you’re old. I remember hearing the song as a boy.

The theology isn’t the best, but I ask you to listen to this stanza: “You’ve got to walk that lonesome valley/ Well you gotta go by yourself/ Well there ain’t nobody else gonna go there for you/ You gotta go there by yourself.” In one way, what it says reflects the 23rd Psalm: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”.

With this in front of us, we’re going to consider . . .

IT’S OLD GROUND, UNTIL YOU HAVE TO WALK IT!

I. Troubled.

So, Jesus said, “Let not your hearts be troubled.” (v.1 a). Well, the disciples were troubled because Jesus had previously announced His impending death, and later announced Judas’ betrayal followed by Peter’s denial. He had made reference to His resurrection, but that didn’t register. The big reality was wrapped in all the turmoil of His impending death, and that can shake the bones of even the strongest Christian. The End!

Recall Peter’s statement: “I will lay down my life for you.” (Jn. 14:37). He didn’t get it. Jesus responded with, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.” (Jn. 14:38). Struggle, turmoil, trouble, death. This is what Jesus would endure for one simple reason: To bear the suffering, death and hell we deserve because of our sin. The Holy Spirit would have this same Apostle Peter write: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous (Jesus) for the unrighteous (that’s us, of course), that he might bring us to God...” (1 Pet. 3:18a). And Paul wrote, “For the death he died he died to sin...” (Rom. 6:10a).

And here’s the other part of the equation for us: struggle, turmoil, trouble and death are ever present on this side of the grave because this side of the grave is still a corrupted world. The evidence of that is horrifically obvious, wouldn’t you agree!? Jesus came to win heaven in heaven, not on earth. Paul and Barnabas instructed the church, then and now, with, “through many hardships we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22). I suspect many who claim Christ don’t want to hear that, and most churches ignore it. Hear it we must! “Through many hardships **we must** enter the kingdom of God.” The writer of Hebrews says, “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” (Heb. 12:6). He doesn’t want us to sing, “I’m not a stranger here, earth is my home.”

F. B. Meyer was a Christian activist and pastor from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We would have issues with some of his theology, but not this insight:

Earthly prosperity is no sign of the special love of heaven; nor are sorrow and care any mark of God’s disfavor, but the reverse. God’s love is robust and true and eager - not for our own comfort, but for our lasting blessedness.

It's old ground and a seemingly lonesome walk, at first, but every child of God will walk it. It's what Jesus said: "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world but I chose you out of the world, the world hates you." (Jn. 15:19). Jesus chose us to be His! The world doesn't want Jesus or His people. The world is outraged by the teaching of sin and the need of a Savior. We are once again seeing what God long ago warned against through Isaiah:

"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

"Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!

"Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!" (Is. 5:20-23).

Therefore, we remember these words of Scripture: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." (1 Pet. 5:5-7). Well, that's what the Cross and empty tomb say to us: "Let not your hearts be troubled." It's "old ground," but persistently moves us in this direction . . .

II. "Take You To Myself."

"In my Father's house are many rooms. 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 take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (vv. 2-3).

We experience a great assortment of troubles. Jesus said we would. It's where sin drives us. But at Calvary and the empty tomb Jesus turned our lives in a different direction: to eternal life! After all, Jesus said, "I have come that they (His sheep) may have life and have it abundantly." (Jn. 10:10). And so, we say with David, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Ps. 23:4) Though we walk through the valley we do not walk it alone. The Word and Sacraments comfort us. Through these means, God speaks to and guides us.

Please listen to this fable of Aesop:

A pigeon oppressed by excessive thirst saw a goblet of water painted on a signboard. Not supposing it to be only a picture, it flew toward it with a loud whirr and unwittingly dashed against the signboard and jarred itself terribly. Having broken its wings by the blow, it fell to the ground and was killed by a bystander.

Commentator David Burgess wrote: "The mockeries of the world are many, and those who are deluded by them not only miss the joys they sought but in their eager pursuit of vanity bring ruin on their souls." He's right. Some might laugh at the inability of the pigeon to distinguish between reality and delusion, but what do you suppose will be the end of those duped by the thinking that this world is their everything?

III. Except.

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." (Jn. vv. 5-6).

It's the statement that throws a multitude into a rage: "No one comes to the Father except through me." Step by step, much of the church is walking, and many have already entered, into rejection of those words of Christ. No one enters into God's eternal presence except - **except** - through Jesus.

It's clear, isn't it? Jesus is not **a way** - or **a truth** - or **a life**. He's not one among a number of choices. He's it! And, as He said, "whoever believes...should have eternal life...whoever does not believe is condemned." (Jn. 3:16b, 18a). It is the Apostle Peter who declares what Scriptures declare: "Salvation is found in no one else (no one else!), for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12).

The old commentator, P. E. Kretzmann wrote:

Christ is the Way to God and to heaven; not merely a leader and guide; He bears, He carries them that are His... Christ is the truth: His every word may be (trusted) implicitly, for it teaches the knowledge of God, directs the way... Christ is the life: He is the Fountain and Giver of all true life, the life that is to be enjoyed eternally at the end of the way.

At the beginning of the sermon I read that one stanza of the song "Lonesome Valley": "You've got to walk that lonesome valley/ Well you gotta go by yourself/ Well there ain't nobody else gonna go there for you/ You gotta go there by yourself." First of all, everybody does walk the valley. However, and once again, for a child of God there is One Who already walked it for us: Jesus, the One Who walks it with us. So we say, and I repeat, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." (Ps. 23:4a).

And the theme for the sermon is "It's Old Ground, Until You Have To Walk It." Well, we're walking it now. We know what's coming: "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Ps. 23:6b).

And so, "Let not your hearts be troubled."

Amen.

Pastor William K. Abbott