

How Can We Know the Way?

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Ninth Sunday of Our Pandemic Crisis
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**Bethany Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Foxborough, Massachusetts
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Text: John 14:5

“Thomas said to [Jesus]: ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going.
How can we know the way?’”

I.

When Thomas asked Jesus “How can we know the way?” he wasn’t asking for directions. No Google Map or GPS device could answer his question. We ask questions like this when we are disoriented, when our resources are uncertain and the outcome is unknown. A question like this cries out for guidance and assurance, not directions from Point A to Point B.

Put yourself in the context of the question. Jesus gathered his disciples for what would be their last supper.¹ His death was imminent, so he said to his disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”² He assured them of God’s presence and guidance on their way forward. He assumed that the disciples already knew this.

Throughout John’s Gospel, we find the disciples consistently confused by Jesus, repeatedly missing the point. What did Jesus mean? Where was he going? What will happen to him and to their movement? It was an anxious time filled with tension and concern. You can feel it in Thomas’s question: “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”³

We’ve all been in situations like this, wondering about the way forward.

- When a loved one dies, we wonder what life will be like without them.
- When a spouse leaves their partner with children as a marriage falls apart.
- When a beloved leader leaves an organization after years of service.
- When a long-held belief system fails us in an overwhelming crisis or catastrophe.
- When a once-in-a-century pandemic disrupts life as we know it, with no end in sight.

So many situations in life leave us wondering about the way forward. A company is bought out. A business shuts down. A church or school closes. A job is lost. A way of life comes to an end. Long-established relationships are disrupted. We wonder what to do next. Out of the depths of such grief and uncertainty we ask:

“How can we know the way?”

II.

No matter what century we live in we share the same human experience. In every generation, the world is daunting and difficult. We are just as anxiety-prone now as the disciples were so long ago. We wish we had answers to our many uncertainties; yet, our journey forward continues with or without them. Life's demands and requirements go on, ready or not.

Jesus prepared his disciples for what was to come. His "farewell discourse...resembles the common literary form of the farewell or last testament of a famous [person]" in the ancient world.⁴ A leader addresses their followers about the future, offers words encouragement and final instructions, ending with a hymn or prayer. Jesus' farewell discourse follows that pattern.⁵

After Jesus washed the disciples' feet in an astonishing display of humility and service⁶, and after giving thanks and breaking bread with them, he offered words of assurance and comfort, caution and guidance. Then, they sang a final hymn and prayed together. It was during this long farewell discourse that we heard Jesus say:

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 that I am going.⁷

It was then that Thomas asked the deep and painful question on every disciple's heart.

- They left everything behind to follow this peasant prophet and spiritual revolutionary from Galilee to Jerusalem.
- They witnessed God's grace and truth in Jesus with prostitutes and Pharisees, beggars and the blind⁸, sinners and the self-righteous.
- They followed him from countryside to town to city, synagogue to temple; from the common people to the centers of power.
- They vowed to follow him and die with him; yet, now that death was imminent, they were anxious, afraid, and uncertain.

In that context, knowing what they knew, facing what they faced, they asked:

"How can we know the way?"

III.

In response, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me."⁹ When Jesus said this, he was not in a theological debate. He was not saying that he was the greatest. He was not preaching to the choir or trying to convert anyone.¹⁰ *In that context*, Jesus offered his disciples comfort and guidance, not an excuse for superiority over others.

Theirs was a crisis of conflict and confidence, of betrayal and death, when clarity of purpose and undying courage were sorely needed. From that time forward, the disciples were compelled to follow Jesus – their spiritual North Star – to navigate the dark and disorienting journey ahead. The way forward was to follow the truth and life of the Light of the world.¹¹

Jesus did not offer one-size-fits-all answers to complex questions. He shared grace and truth with everyone according to their need and circumstance.¹² For far too long, we have misconstrued John 14:6 to mean that Jesus is *the only way* to God, that Christianity is the only true religion.

These words are used as a litmus test for Christian faith... They are taken by some as the rallying cry of Christian triumphalism, proof positive that Christians have the corner on God and that people of any and all other faiths are condemned.¹³

In the throes of any crisis, Jesus tells us: “Follow me.” When all else fails, “Follow me.” It doesn’t matter which religion or country is the greatest, or which leader is the greatest ever. Vanity serves the self. Humility serves others.¹⁴ The litmus test for Christians is not found in our allegiance to creed or country; it is found in our fidelity to the Way of Christ.

The decisive indication of a Christian now more than ever is found in Christ-like courage and compassion in the service others, beginning with the least and last among us.

We now know the way because Christ has shown us the Way!

IV.

To an already anxious and uncertain world, we now must add the global coronavirus pandemic, which has infected millions, taken hundreds of thousands of lives, devastated the economy, and compelled us to maintain physical distancing from one another. In the midst of so much uncertainty, we find ourselves asking again: “How can we know the way?”

Will COVID-19 be vanquished by means of vaccination or herd immunity? If so, when? How will our lives be different going forward? What needs to change and what will change in spite of us? What kind of leadership do we need to guide us and what core principles will inform our attitudes and actions? Whose light will we follow?

How will faith communities need to adapt and change? How will Bethany need to change? What creativity and innovation will be needed to engage the new normal in days to come? Will we go back to what we have known and loved, or will we go forward into a new way of being Christ’s Church? With so many unanswered questions, we ask: “How can we know the way?”

Like Thomas, we are not asking for directions. We ask this question because the way forward is so unclear, the resources are so uncertain, and the outcome is very much unknown. We ask it because we are anxious and concerned for ourselves, our loved ones, and our way of life. We ask it because we also need guidance and assurance for the journey ahead.

The late novelist E. L. Doctorow¹⁵ has some wise advice for all of us. He once said that “writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.”¹⁶ Doesn’t that describe our present experience? We can only see short distances ahead as we pass through the darkness of uncertainty.

We would be well-advised to agree on our destination in order to make it through this pandemic darkness. It’s is much more than opening up the economy as soon as possible. It’s more than developing and distributing a vaccine throughout the world. It’s more than making any one nation “great again,” balancing budgets, or growing churches like Bethany.

Our ultimate destination is the Beloved Community of God: a world of just peace that respects the vital balance of God’s Creation and honors the dignity of all God’s people. How do we get there? We get there by following the Light of Christ’s way, truth, and life through the darkness! So, keep your headlights clean and your hands on the wheel!

Never forget that Easter comes after Good Friday: that the resurrection comes after the crucifixion, that love lives on in spite of evil. Never forget that the Renaissance came out of the Black Death, the most fatal pandemic in recorded human history. Out of that dark age, Europe was delivered into the promise of human enlightenment.^{17,18}

Though “weeping may linger for the night, . . . joy comes with the morning.”¹⁹ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.²⁰

So, don’t ever lose heart! The Risen Christ shows us the Way!

May God grant us the wisdom and courage we need for the facing of this hour, and for the living of these days. We know the Way. Now it’s up to us to follow it!

Amen.

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END NOTES AND REFERENCES

(Unless noted, all Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.)

1. Accounts of the Last Supper are found in Mark 14:12-26, Matthew 26:17-30, Luke 22:7-38, and John chapters 13-17.
2. John 14:1.
3. John 14:5.
4. Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hylen, *John (Westminster Bible Companion)*, Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006; 142.
5. Examples from the Hebrew Bible include Deuteronomy (entire book); Genesis 49; Joshua 22-24; First Chronicles 28-29.
6. See John 13:1-17.
7. John 14:1-4.
8. Light and darkness, seeing and not seeing, are two major themes in John’s version of the Gospel. For example, Nicodemus came to see Jesus “in the dark” (John 3); literally, in the evening, figuratively in spiritual darkness. Same for “the blind” i.e. people blinded by their own customs and traditions, etc. If John used the term “sight impaired” in our time, he would mean those unable to see because of their biases and prejudices, creeds and customs, etc. John is a Gospel of nuance, so pay close attention!
9. John 14:6.
10. Interpreting John 14:6 as an affirmation of the superiority of Christianity above all religions stunts the grace and truth of Christ, generating more hubris than humility. History is replete with examples of the damage, even evil, that such hubris produces. Emphasis on “personal” salvation in some Christian traditions, combined with excessive Western individualism, generates a compartmentalized form of Christian faith that dichotomizes personal faith from public life and policy. As the late Marcus Borg observed so often in his writings, salvation is equally personal and social. We cannot have one without the other.
11. A recurrent theme in John’s version of the Gospel, from chapter 1 forward. Jesus = Light.

12. For example, to the disciples, Jesus said, 'Follow me.' To the women at the well, Jesus said 'I am the Messiah.' To the man by the pool of Bethesda, Jesus said, 'Stand up...and walk.'" To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus said, 'Go and sin no more.' To the man born blind, Jesus said, 'Go and wash your eyes.' To doubting Thomas, Jesus said, 'reach out and touch me.' Not to Peter, after he abandoned him – Jesus said, 'Tend my sheep.' In John's version of the Gospel, *only Nicodemus*, the Pharisee, was confronted with the need to be "born again." Only those most certain of their certainties need to be born again, i.e. need to start over.
13. Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, Volume IX in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Leander E. Keck, et. al., eds. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995; 743.
14. See Luke 22:24-38. During the Last Supper, a dispute arose among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. It was an outrage then, and is an outrage now, that the ego needs of any one person supersede the well-being of all. The greatest among us are those who serve without concern for their rank in the annals of history. Do we apply this core Gospel teaching when we vote for those who will hold the highest offices in the land, let alone regional and local offices in government?
15. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._L._Doctorow
16. As quoted in Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (25th Anniversary Edition). New York: Anchor Books, 2019 (original version, 1994); p. 17.
17. On the Black Death, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death.
18. On the Renaissance, see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance>.
19. Psalm 30:5b.
20. See John 1:5.