
What Are You Hanging Your Heart On?

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder
Easter 5 – Year A

Friends—I needed this Gospel this week. Did you? Thank you, Jesus, for these words of comfort.

Some of you know by now that I found myself at the hospital Sunday night with my son, who fell and broke his arm. No one ever wants to go to the hospital for themselves, much less for their children.

They are places of healing, yes! But healing in response to suffering and pain.

It pained me to see my son's tiny arm swelling up, to see his brave face traced by tears and a quivering lip. I muttered lots of colorful language under my breath, even as I prayed.

Going to the hospital during a pandemic means added risk, added stress, and added isolation. It was the last place I wanted to be.

Until I walked through the doors. One of the strange realities of being a priest is that hospitals are familiar places. Blessing folks soon after a birth, in seasons of sickness, prior to an operation and at the time of death, hospitals become familiar and even sacred ground. So when I walked through the doors on Sunday seeing familiar hallways, I began calling to mind familiar faces and familiar moments of blessing. I no longer felt alone.

Jesus says: Do not let your hearts be troubled. I go to prepare a place for you. I will take you to myself. I am the way. I am truth. I am life.

These words were already playing in my head as I sat and waited for answers on Sunday—a strange perk of preparing to preach in the coming week.

It's hard having to dwell in the unknown. That's true in the hospital, of course, but it's true of all of us in this strange season of social distance for the common good. We sit with the unknowns, thinking tomorrow will be clearer, only to face new questions and concerns the next day.

The disciples lived in a state of unknowing too, even while being physically present with God incarnate. Today's story reminds us of a time when Jesus knew he would be handed over to death, and he tried to prepare his friends for the harsh transition and the painful distance that was coming.

Jesus tells his friends that there's plenty of room in the presence of God. Room for friends, room for strangers, room for all the baggage we carry around in our hearts, room for our strengths and room for our weaknesses, room for our messes and doubts—there is room for all of it. There is plenty of room. There's a place for you in God's presence. There's a place for me too.

Jesus tells his friends that he's preparing the way—that when we step into the unknown, Jesus is already there. We are never alone and never unexpected or unwelcome. Jesus is ready for us and waiting for us in the presence of God.

Jesus tells his friends that he'll bring them along. Even as Jesus is preparing to say goodbye, he's clear that he longs to be with us. That where he is, we will be. Jesus reminds us we are never ever alone.

Of course, sometimes words of comfort boggle the mind. Has someone ever reminded you that God is near—

and have you ever wondered in response... but how? Where is God? What does that even mean? Have you ever thought that maybe some concrete dates and details might be a little more comforting?

When will we return to normal? When will schools open? When will churches open? When can we start celebrating birthdays together? When will I find a job? When will I get married? When will my suffering cease? When will they find a cure? The disciples say: *We do not know where you are going... how can we know the way?*

Jesus tries again to comfort his friends with the words, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." He says this to comfort his friends. The context is important because out of context one could twist "I am the way" to mean "my way or the highway, buddy." But the tone here is one of assurance. It's one of invitation.

Come with me. I'm preparing the way for you because I want to be with you. Yes, there's plenty of room for all-the-things you bring, just being you. I'm telling you this because it's true. You can trust me. I am truth. And I am life... meaning that nothing, not even death, can separate you from me and my love for you.

These are comforting words.

I was reminded this week that Martin Luther once said that God is what you hang your heart on.^[1] So I ask you, what are you hung up on? What is it that is occupying your heart and mind these days... what are you hanging your heart on?

Are you hung up on things lost? On missed graduations and milestones? On a lost life, lost job, or lost date night? No matter how grave or how trivial, these losses are real. And they are to be grieved. But that's not where we hang our heart. It's not where we dwell.

Are you hung up on what's next? Wondering with anxiety how we begin again safely? What's next for our kids' education, for our economy, for our most vulnerable neighbors displaced by eviction? These anxieties are real, and we need to name them. But that's not where we hang our heart. It's not where we dwell.

Are you, like the disciples, hung up on the unknown? You're in good company. It's ok to feel dislodged and dislocated. But know that your dwelling place is with God, and that you can bring all those feelings with you.

My friends, Jesus wants to comfort us—wants to comfort you. And he does so with an invitation to dwell with—stay with—abide with and in the presence of God. No amount of suffering or social distance can take you from God's presence. Feel your feelings, but don't let your hearts be troubled. Hang your heart up on God, whose heart is big enough for all of you.

Amen.

^[1] Luther, Martin. *Luther's Spirituality*. Paulist Press, 2007. Page 193. "Now anything upon which you hang your heart and rely, I say, is really your God."