

John's gospel tells us that a force, or a substance, or an energy called the *logos* or the *word* has been present from the very beginning of time: This Word was God, and was with God, and was in God. And somehow, someway, this energy manifested itself into human form. In other words, the very energy that created humanity decided that it wanted to live the human experience. An infinite being became a finite creature. The most complex thing in the universe, well really beyond the universe, sought the intimacy of a species SO MUCH LESS significant than Her. And in the life of Jesus, humanity is offered, at least up to this point in history, our fullest and most complete understanding of the nature and character of our Creator: God is love. It's a story that's SO audacious, it has to be true.

In this morning's text, even though we're still in the Season of Easter, we move back to a pre-resurrection moment. I realize that today's text doesn't follow in sequential order with the stories of Mary at the tomb, and the Emmaus Road experience, and of Experiential Thomas (I don't like the descriptor of Doubting), or of the late-afternoon cookout Jesus shared with the disciples on the lakeshore. But we've all been binging on Netflix for weeks now, and surely you've watched lots of movies and TV shows with epilogues that feature flashback scenes. I want you to imagine hearing these words of Jesus, not before Easter, but after. These words, give context to the life and ministry of Jesus.

This is a farewell speech. Jesus is back in Jerusalem on that fateful Passover Week, and he's telling his friends that he's gonna have to leave them soon...this season is passing. Jesus is empathetic to the grief, anxiety, and uncertainty his friends feel in such an uneasy time. "Don't let your hearts be troubled," he says, "Have belief in God, and in me, because God's got more room than you can imagine. And I wouldn't come here, experience you, love you, commune with you, if it wasn't for the purpose of helping to prepare you to experience all of God's spaciousness."

This is my redaction, but here's what I think Jesus really means by this talk of mansions and rooms. I think he's telling us that Pharaoh and Caesar and Herod can build beautiful, vast, expansive homes with more rooms than they'd ever need. But such construction projects are finite. These rooms are not filled with love; their faucets do not emit living water; their tables are not abundant; their clocks do not keep liturgical time; their doors slam shut on community; their gates

hoard resources. But God, well God, God, offers something that transcends space and time: God's big enough to have dominion without domination; God's inventive enough to offer abundance without the need to hoard resources; God's creative enough to look beyond the material and the physical, and see into the hearts, souls, and minds of God's people. God gathers God's people in every dimension. And God endures in every dimension.

So Jesus says to his friends, and to you and me as well, "I'm going back to be with God, except it's not really backwards or forwards. I'm just being the me I've always been. And even better, if I'm in God, that means you are in God, and in me, too. So don't be troubled, I'm going to the place I need to be now, and you know just where to find me."

It's at this point, I'm really grateful that Thomas is a disciple. I feel like he's the guy at the end of conference call, or the family meeting that's been shaking his head, "yes," the whole time because things are happening really fast, and nobody else wants to admit that they are just as lost as him. But at some point he feels a sense of duty for the community, and he says, "Okay, wait time out, sorry for asking a redundant question, but, did you actually tell us the place you are going to, and the way to get there? Because up to this point, there are no addresses, or coordinates, or anything specific beyond very vague details. And if I go home and tell my partner that I don't have an address for her to put in the GPS, and not to worry, we'll see where the road takes us, I'll just feel it out, she is NOT gonna be happy with me."

Okay, illustration time, Jonathan Eidson, this one is for you. Jesus uses metaphors like house and kingdom, vine and bread, and SO often the disciples think in literal terms. Thomas and his friends (that's for you Mary Allen, and all our toddlers out there!), think Jesus is describing a physical space. It's very similar to the 1985 film *Jewel of the Nile*, where Michael Douglas and Danny DeVito are deflated when Kathleen Turner informs them that the Jewel is not some precious stone, but is actually a Holy Man, who will bring a different kind of wealth to the people. The disciples, are stuck in a pre-resurrection world, fixated on finite things and finite places.

But Jesus says, “Tommy, Tommy, Tommy, you know the way, buddy. I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

Too often, we act, and we live, and we believe as if God resides in a place. One place. Our place. But God is too big for places. God resides wherever people gather in God’s spirit.

Jesus isn’t saying he’s the Appian Way, or the highway, or the bi-way, or the thruway, or even the only way. Jesus is simply saying he’s a way for us to see into God’s heart, and for God to see into ours. I want to invite you think about someone you love: perhaps your partner or spouse; perhaps a friend; perhaps someone you’ve just developed a special sense of camaraderie with. Well, correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think the way to finding friendship, or romance, or partnership is simply traveling to an address. I believe it’s locating a way to a person’s heart – that is always looking for, appreciating, and acknowledging the deep beauty and value you find in that person, and allowing them to do the same for you. Jesus modeled God’s love in friendship. Jesus gives the disciples (and me and you as well!) all sorts of way-finders that help them know how to locate his spirit: the words of Eucharist; the words or the framing of prayer; the act of sharing, and so and on and so on.

Jesus is the truth. Not the only truth, but he’s most certainly a credentialed truth. Jesus is witness to the idea that God is vested in humanity, loves humanity, and empowers humanity. And because of this, God allows anyone who recognizes God’s real, authentic presence, to be present with God in the same way as Jesus. As the establishment spends its days lost in a forest of details, blind men see, beggars find healing, controversial women find living water, and faithful women find friendship that endures even death. You wanna see Jesus, even in a post-Easter, post-Ascension world? Live into the truth that God isn’t all that interested in animating those entities that claim to be God; Instead, God’s interested in animating, residing with, filling up, all those folk who choose to believe in a good word from the Word.

Jesus is the life. That is, Jesus reveals the kind of living that endures because of the way and the truth. When we follow the ways of Jesus, we enter into

communities of mutually enduring and fulfilling relationships. When we live into such relationships, we seek a truth, not one that benefits systems, but rather, one that seeks to illumine the value and uniqueness of every person. When we love our neighbors, and when we see their value, and when we proclaim our shared connection as God's beloved, we begin to live, and live abundantly.

Here on this fifth Sunday of Easter, fifty-something days into social-distancing, like Thomas, we ask, "Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

And Jesus responds: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

And I think about that Samaritan woman at the well. She went to her own version of Costco each day at noon – she was completely exposed to a virus – the virus of privilege and arrogance and establishment – if she left her home, she risked being subjected to a barrage of verbal assaults from more upstanding and righteous water-gatherers. So she used social-distancing; she shopped in the noon-day heat, when the well was empty. And when she met Jesus, she was able to see it wasn't well-water she needed after all, it was living water.

And I think about ole Nicodemus, coming to see Jesus in the safety of darkness, seeking new life, but wondering how somebody could be born again. I wonder, if he lived today, would Nicodemus be like all those folks in this age of Corona who believe that life is an economy, and an establishment, and a getting-back-to-normal. "And how in the world can we re-birth this system that gives us our very lives?" Nicodemus asks. And Jesus just shakes his head, 'cause if you think it's the system that gives you life, gives you purpose, gives you standing, then you might as well believe you can make your mama, a mama twice.

And I think about that Blind Man, struggling all of his life, devalued all of his life, and hearing from the authorities that he was broken and no good. And yet here came life. Yes, Jesus helps him to see. You can spend time worrying about the optics of that procedure if you want. But that's not the seeing that interests me. In one conversation, Jesus helps this man to see that he has value, that he is God's beloved, that he has a life that can be abundant, too!

Sardis Baptist Church, the way to Jesus is not a time machine back to March 1st. And the truth of Jesus is not the Dow Jones Industrial Average. And the life of Jesus is not a Memorial Day Sale at Lowes.

The way to Jesus and of Jesus is the practice of empathy and compassion for our neighbors. And the truth of Jesus is that EVERY. SINGLE. PERSON is a child of God, not a number on a spreadsheet. And the life of Jesus is community – the gathering and scattering of God’s beloved in God’s presence, whether virtual or physical, ancient or modern.

Friends in the days and weeks to come, may God give us the resolve to seek the life-giving abundancy of Jesus over the life-choking redundancy of Caesar’s systems.

May His Way, His Truth, His Life be ours, and may it be right now! Amen.