“Q and A: Questions and Answers”

John 14:1-14

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God bless Thomas and Philip.

In this story, they are vulnerable, human, asking the questions on everyone’s minds. They are scared. This story comes from what is known as Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse,” in the Gospel of John, which is a long lecture, essentially, Jesus gives to the disciples during his last night with them.

They’ve eaten, he’s washed their feet, and then he teaches them for the last time before his arrest and execution, and he teaches about his upcoming betrayal, his death and resurrection.

This is not the first time they’ve heard this from Jesus, but from the way he keeps repeating himself, the way he stops, reframes, clarifies, tries again, it’s clear that they don’t get it.

And it makes sense. Would you? I mean, we get it *now*, because we’ve read the book and we know how it ends. We are Easter people, after all – we look at death not with fear, but with hope, trusting in Jesus’ promise to be with us always, trusting that relationships and love do not end when we die. We are Easter people – *we* get it.

But back then? The disciples? How could they get it? They’ve been following Jesus for just a handful of years, and they truly have no idea what’s coming.

And this night with Jesus, this final night where he seems to be trying to empty his brain, empty his heart into theirs one last time – well, it’s clear that something is different. And so, the disciples are scared.

We know what happens to people when they’re scared – their amygdala, or “lizard brain” kicks in – the most primitive part of the brain takes over, system override – and the person often has a fight, flight, or freeze response. Super helpful in our ancient lifestyles of fighting saber toothed tigers, and still super helpful in times of immediate, terrible danger today.

What I’ve learned in the time through which we are living, this pandemic – I don’t know about you all, but I have experienced more anxiety, dread, and pure *fear* in the past 2 months than maybe ever before in my life – And what I’ve learned from helpful psychologist friends is that even in times of great prolonged stress, our lizard brains are still driving things – for some of us, that means bad choices, like lashing out at my husband about the dishes in the sink or stress-eating an entire bag of popcorn labeled “Party Size.”

For many people, in periods of great stress during which time our lizard brains are doing a lot of the driving – well, it doesn’t leave us with much bandwidth for higher level thinking and deep comprehension. I know I’m operating at about half- to two-thirds-capacity these days - it is taking me hours, days even, to master new tasks, to get my head around all that I’m taking in as I begin this role as your newest Pastor. I’m grateful for the patience of my colleagues – your other pastors and staff – as I make mistakes, forget little things, and ask a million questions.

God bless Thomas and Philip.

Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. (Yeah, right.) 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 where I am going.”

This is so lovely, right? It’s comforting, it’s reassuring. *Now.*

*After* Easter. But imagine hearing it *then.*

Thomas asks the obvious, the lizard-brain, please-spell-it-out-for-me-so-I-understand, question: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

So Jesus tries again: “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. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

And then Philip – God bless Philip – Philip says this – and it sounds like a statement, but we know it’s really a question, a plea for clarity and concision: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

These two disciples are speaking on behalf of the whole group of disciples – that’s how it works, right? One or two brave folks ask the questions on everyone’s minds. And, they are speaking on behalf of the Johannine Community. If you haven’t heard that term before, the Johannine Community is the name biblical scholars have given to the group of people for whom John’s gospel was written.

“Context” – this is one of my favorite words in preaching and Bible study. I believe it’s incredibly helpful for us today to consider the contexts of any given Bible story – that includes the literary context of the story, what was happening, when was it happening, etc., and also the historical context of the writing of the story, which typically took place many years after the events themselves transpired.

We know John’s gospel was written down decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, most likely at the end of the 1st century. And these stories, like all our scriptures, weren’t written in a vacuum, but were written in a particular place and for a particular audience.

The Johannine Community, the original hearers and readers of these stories, were most likely a group of new Christians who had either left or been forced out of their Jewish community for choosing to follow Jesus’ teachings (Moloney). These group of believers removed from their synagogue must have felt isolated, lonely, and fearful of what the future will hold for them.

And so we hear in the words of Thomas and Philip the questions and fears not only of the disciples, but of the Johannine Community, as well. And, if we’re being honest with ourselves, I bet we hear our own questions, as well.

How can we know the way, Jesus? How can we know God?

Please, just spell it out – just *show* us. We want to know what the whole finished journey of discipleship looks like, preferably in a clear, easy-to-read, bullet list format.

And Jesus, who is a fabulous teacher, a patient teacher – most of the time – Jesus knows that we can’t *know* without un-knowing.

My husband, Kevin tells me that in learning theory, there is this idea of the “persistence of prior knowledge,” that what students already know or think they know impacts their ability to learn something new (Driver) (Whitehead).

We see this in the disciples’ questions. They’ve been with Jesus for years, they’ve seen amazing miracles – healings, signs, wonders – they’ve heard him teach and preach and flip the status quo on its head, and yet they are still asking the same old thing in the same old way – “Help us to *know*, Lord.” Or maybe, “Help us to know *you*, Lord.”

And so Jesus is patiently, again and again, attempting to help them unlearn what they think they know, as they operate in a state of fear and anxiety, so that they *can* learn what they don’t know they already know.

How’s that for clarity and concision?

This is what Jesus does – for the disciples, for the Johannine Community, and for us, today:

Jesus says, “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

*We don’t know where you are going, Jesus! How can we know the way?*

Jesus tries again and says, “I am the way. Everyone comes to God through me.”

*Show us God!*

Jesus tries again and says, “Whoever has seen me has seen God! You already know God!”

And when we – disciples, Johannine Christians, and us – when all of us *still* can’t grasp what Jesus is actually saying, he tries yet again, and pivots this time – away from knowledge, away from belief – to action.

“The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

This is the great good news of this story: that no matter the fear, no matter how silly the question may be (or not be), no matter our persistence in holding on to old knowledge we no longer need, Jesus will not give up on us.

Jesus will try, again and again and again, to teach us what we need to know, and to teach us what we *already* know. Jesus is a good and patient teacher, and will try and try to find something that sticks for us. And if we still don’t understand who he is, and if we can’t quite believe all that he says about God’s grace and love, then at the very least, we can do what he does, follow his example.

We can be loving, we can be patient. We can practice compassion,

and care for the most vulnerable in our community.

Truthfully, you all can *continue* to do those things, as this church family is already doing them. One example: just think of our drive-thru parade last week – I felt so cared for, so loved, as you went out of your ways to welcome me and my family, and all of it happened in a way that protected people’s health, and shielded the vulnerable.

As a letter attributed to Peter, a case study if ever there was one in failing to “get it,” would later read, “God has called us out of darkness into marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9b).

So friends, do not let your hearts be troubled. Jesus didn’t leave the disciples alone – he kept at it until they got it: he appeared personally to reassure Thomas after the resurrection, who then went on to become a great missionary and church builder.

And Philip was literally shown his way by the Spirit of the Lord into a new vocation as evangelist and preacher.

We can *not* believe and claim to *not* know, like Thomas and Philip, and tell the truth about it. And, friends, Jesus did not, has not, and will not ever leave us on our own.

Jesus is the way –

 the way that God is revealed to us again and again,

 the way that will persist through all our questions,

 until we are ready to trust the answers,

 the way that God “calls us out of darkness into marvelous light”

 – again, and again, and again.

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