

**May 14, 2017 – Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
**Mother's Day**  
**"Troubled Hearts"**  
**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis**  
**John 14:1-14**



*"Let not 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 and prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."*

These words begin a section in the gospel of John – known as Jesus' "Farewell Discourse." The occasion is Jesus saying "goodbye" to those he had taught for the past three years. They had become a family. They lived and worked together. They loved one another. They had given up everything to follow him, but now he was informing them that he would soon be departing. Indeed, their hearts were surprised, bewildered, confused, and troubled. "Why is he leaving now?" They must have asked or thought. "How will we live without him? What will we do?"

Similar questions vex the minds of those sitting in the pew during a memorial service as those same words of Jesus are repeated and the grieving seek hope from God's Spirit and comfort from those who walk alongside during those desperate days. *"Let not your hearts be troubled."*

But troubled hearts are not only the result of loss and grief. Often our hearts are troubled for a whole variety of reasons – disappointment, indecision, frustration, betrayal. The list is endless. I'd like us today to consider these words of Jesus as he offers a source of healing to troubled hearts – no matter the reason.

I recently heard a story on NPR about how spouses who lose their partners are highly susceptible to succumbing to death themselves shortly following the loss. It appears that troubled hearts – hearts broken by loss and grief are quite vulnerable as sometimes the loss is quite simply overwhelming. We see this in the lives of co-habiting animals as well.

And, I imagine, you witnessed the fragile heart of Jimmy Kimmel as he told the story of his infant son's malformed heart. Many of our hearts were moved as he opened his to those watching his show.

Next week, when I offer my teaching on spiritual formation for clergy at a CREDO conference I'm going to invite them to do something many of us find ourselves resistant to doing. I will invite them to take what a Native American proverb suggests as the longest journey we will ever make – that is the journey from our head to our heart.

We like to stay up here (point to head). In our heads can convince ourselves that we are in control. Through the reasoning mind we typically make sense of things. There is a distinct order – a cause and effect – a sequential nature of life. Staying in our heads is often a helpful safeguard against the overwhelming nature of emotions one experiences in a troubled heart.

In our hearts, all bets are off. Emotions can confound and confuse. And so our hearts and our heads are often in tension to the point that I often find myself saying, “My head says one thing – but my heart is telling me something different.”

That's a healthy tension and generally guides us in decision making so that our thinking and feeling functions (of which each one of us has a bias or leaning) help to “stay the course” and maintain balance.

But when a loved one dies, or one of our children faces a critical illness – we may as well forget about our brains. Our hearts take over – and when they are deeply troubled – we need help.

It's to that situation that Jesus reminds us of what we need to hear time and again,

*“Let not your hearts be troubled – Believe in God, believe also in me.”*

In the midst of deepest anxiety Jesus calls us back to our most basic belief. Come back to the source of all hope. Come back to your faith in God.

*“In my Father's house there are many dwelling places – in fact, I'm going to ensure there is a place for you.”*

At the memorial service, most take great comfort in this. No matter what your theology of the afterlife, Jesus here gives us the reassurance that there is more to come than what we experience now. This life is only the beginning. We have so much more that we can depend upon.

*“If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you?”*

Perhaps you are thinking, that's all well and good for the afterlife – but what about now? I think the passage suggests a both/and rather than an either/or. In fact, I think the passage suggests that God is always making room – a dwelling place for us – in this life and in the next. Our task is to believe – Believe in God - and to come back to the God who is always in the process of preparing a room – a place for us.

I've written recently about this "God who makes space for us" based on a Chasidic tale of the Baal Shem Tov. You may remember the example of the toddler learning to walk. As she does, she looks to the parent who she has learned to trust during the first 12-18 months of her life. When she finally stands, she looks toward the parent – all smiles – she is ready to move. The encouraging parent beckons, "Come to me. You can do it."

The child takes her first steps toward the parent when the parent does the most unusual thing. The parent begins to back away which causes both a sense of wonder, confusion, and not a little anger on the part of the child as she inevitably falls and wails in frustration. The parent then helps the child regain balance and the process is repeated again and again until the child successfully masters the skill of walking.

The child will never learn to walk unless enough room is made for her to do so. Space is given as a whole new world begins to open and the child discovers what she never knew before was possible.

A troubled heart can kill us or it can open us to what we never knew was possible if only we believe. If we see the initial emptiness as space for us to believe and make our way back to the God who beckons us, "Come unto me. I will give you rest."

Jesus took all this one step further. By saying his "goodbye" to the disciples he not only told them about the eternal gift they had in God's never-ending presence, but that they would eventually do even greater works than he. By that I don't think he meant that we would raise the dead or turn water into wine (although I've not tried either one lately). I think he meant for us to be aware of the power that we have as we carry the God presence within us. In fact, we are the God presence in a world that so desperately needs to be reminded of that hope.

Our words, our prayers, our acts become the living presence of the God that brings hope to our own troubled hearts as well as the hearts of all those in need. [Pause]

I will continue to read these words at memorial services. Indeed, they bring comfort to grieving hearts – troubled hearts as they experience the deep pain of loss. But I invite you to read them often and accept their invitation yet again, "Believe in God" – the God who is making room for you.

Amen.