



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Acts 7:55-60](#) [Psalms 31:1-5,15-16](#) [1 Peter 2:2-10](#) [John 14:1-14](#)

I greet you all in the name and in the love of Jesus, the Risen One. A hearty hello to everyone! These beautiful late Spring days are just wonderful. I hope you all are getting some opportunity to enjoy the fresh, warming air, the sun and brilliant blue sky, and all of the greening and blooming of the earth around us.

In this time in the great 50 days of Easter, we continue to hear about the early followers of Jesus, and we turn to words Jesus offered his disciples before his death which he might indeed have repeated similarly in those times he appeared to them after his resurrection but before he ascended. We hear how the story of God's great work through the birth of the Church – even in persecution – advanced. And we hear Jesus telling us that we will carry on his great work and that he will continue to meet us and draw us to himself. No matter what happens, God is with us. We abide with God. Just as Jesus Christ is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, so we are drawn close in relationship with God. We are never alone.

Today's reading from the Gospel of John is in those chapters known as the "Farewell Discourse." Jesus is at the Passover meal with his disciples, before his trial and death, before his resurrection. But here, today, we hear from it again. Because, these words of Jesus are at the heart of how we are called to be with one another and with God. These words are full of the promise and pledge that God will be with us, and that what matters most to God is the love that binds us to the Lord, to each other, and to the world around us that is hungry for love. The passage from John today is at the opening of several chapters that promise the coming of the Advocate – the Holy Spirit – and that give us a vision of what it means to abide with Jesus. "Abide in me, as I abide in you... I am the vine, and you are the branches."

Friends – we have been doing a whole lot of abiding! More than we asked for, more than we are used to. We have been following as best as we are able the "stay at home" orders for our state and across the country and world. I was just on the phone earlier this week with a prior student of mine from Ghana. Like for us here, the schools there are closed, the churches and mosques and temples are closed, the children are at home doing their school lessons, and people are doing as much as they can to work from home and from their own land. We are not doing this alone, this unsettling thing of staying physically distant from each other. It is what we are doing around the world, as we attempt to make our way through this pandemic, this pestilence, that is continuing.

It feels lonely. It feels unsettling. It feels disorienting. It can get frustrating. And it seems to just continue, without a clear and defined ending point. I read this week of a Baptist pastor in rural Georgia who stood before two coffins. They were husband and wife, each having died in separate hospitals from the coronavirus, each unaware of what the other was facing and suffering, each unaware of the other's death. The disease not only isolates. It threatens with a terrible isolation if one becomes ill, even when people most want to reach out and care. So, we practice withdrawal to reduce the chance of spreading the disease. But it feels draining to keep at it.

Friends, I wonder if maybe part of our frustration and loneliness and unsettledness is related to how we are approaching this time. It has been a time imposed on us, not chosen. So, it is easy to resent it or be annoyed by it while we hunker down. We are doing this not out of a desire to draw closer to God, like the ancient Desert Fathers and Mothers or different monastic communities, or like going on an extended spiritual retreat; no, we did this out of a response related to fear and a desire to prevent the worst from happening. So, it is easy to stay with the experience of this as a hunkering down, an anxiety-driven time of withdrawal.

But maybe we can turn this time more truly to a time of abiding, and not just sheltering. Maybe there is space for us to thrive and be truly alive in this time, instead of just surviving.

Jesus says "Abide in me, as I abide in you." What does it mean to abide with one another and with God? Think of the warmth of a mother's embrace. Especially today, on this Mother's Day. Think of the warmth of love felt in holding one another. Think also of the sense of ease and safe space that we can feel with one another in a household, in a place where we live and where we trust one another and care for one another and make as good a space as possible for us to share together. Think of the give and take of relationships where we abide with each other – we stretch out and do things on our own, but return to our time together, and there are ways that our time together feeds us even when we are on our own facing life's adventures and challenges and duties.

Abiding with Jesus means trusting Jesus – and it means getting to know Jesus and letting Jesus get to know you. Warts and all. Trusting that Jesus' love will not change. In his Father's house are many dwellings – many spaces for all people, for each of us and for all the sheep of other folds that he is drawing to himself. We will not be alone, and even now we are not alone. The promise is that wherever Christ Jesus is, there we may be also. We. Not just I. We.

Put yourself in Jesus' arms. Let God's love enfold you. Throw your arms around God – in your dwelling. Invite God deeper into your own dwelling, and find what dwellings Jesus is preparing for you and for all of us.

It is fine for us to be asking the hard questions, like Thomas and Philip asked. We don't know where we are going, or the way forward, in this time. We don't see clearly the way. We don't see the great destination of final presence with God. These disciples were experiencing some fear and anxiety and troubled hearts as they gathered with Jesus. They were wondering, "Is this

the end? What is going to happen next?” And they were afraid of losing their way and losing themselves and any sense of direction if Jesus was going to leave them. This was before he died, certainly – but it must also have been their anxiety after he rose again but was going to ascend to the Father.

My Lutheran and Presbyterian pastor colleagues here in Coeur d’Alene and Post Falls, in our weekly bible studies together, said, “It is not going *out there* that we need to fear. We do not need to be afraid of stepping out there. We need to fear being without Jesus – anywhere we are.” I think they were really trying to say that the most important thing to remember is that we are never alone, that Jesus is with us. Jesus is basically saying in these verses from John, “I’m here for you, be here for me.” If the disciples remain in the Way and the Truth and the Life of Jesus, that holds them. If we stay connected in the Way and the Truth and the Life of Jesus, that holds us, steady.

And then, Jesus is so audacious as to go on to say, “You will do greater works than these.” You, friends, today, here in north Idaho and across this region, will do greater works than these that Jesus himself has done. We, together. What might this look like?

We will only come to know what might be done and what God desires to be done as we abide. Abide in Love. Abide in the One who is Risen.

The writer of 1st Peter picks up this core idea of abiding, and being woven together and bound together. The writer invites early suffering Christians, and us in any age including today, with these words:

Come to him, a living stone, rejected by mortals but chosen and precious in God’s sight, And, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light... Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.

Friends, our true identity, our true home, our true Way and Life is with Jesus Christ. In this time, open your heart and mind to Christ, more and more and more. Let all your feelings, thoughts, words, and actions be in Jesus’ presence and with Jesus as your loving companion. If we are true to opening ourselves, even to speak and act with boldness and freedom in the name and for the sake of Jesus, we may see the heavens open and see God enthroned in glory – just as Stephen did before his death. The glory of God is now. Heaven is ready to break in and is already breaking in. Abide with God, and you will see it. Let your hearts be reshaped and reborn each day, and you will live in and among the dwellings Christ is preparing for all the world. Draw close. Abide. Trust. And be changed.

Amen.