

Denice K. Leslie
Fifth Sunday of Easter
(Preached on Third Sunday of E. for the
Memorial Remembrance of Warren Earnest Carr)
John 14: 1 – 14

“Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled”

“Did you hear about the man traveling from New York to Atlanta on a business trip? His wife was due to join him the next day. Upon arrival, although unsure of his wife's e-mail address, he sent her a message anyway.

It was a good e-mail address, but unfortunately it wasn't his wife's. Instead, it went to a pastor's wife whose husband had died only the day before. She read the message and promptly fainted.

When one of her children found her, she glanced at the e-mail. The three-part message read:

"Darling, just checked in."

"Looking forward to your arrival tomorrow."

P.S. "It sure is hot down here!"¹

If you knew Warren Carr you know he could make a joke about almost anything and that he would above all want us to be grinning big today. He did not like tears !

He was a man who loved life and celebrated it as an amazing gift of God. For Warren the cup of life was always half full, never half empty! He wants us to celebrate life today and he wanted his going home farewell to be just that: a celebration of the gift of life and the power of faith to overcome adversity. Because of his trust in God, Warren was ready for his death even as he loved and vigorously engaged this life. He knew and trusted the promises of Jesus and did his best to live them out in his own life.

So Warren would ask us to hear Jesus' words as one who trusts in them, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me.”*

Jesus' time honored words of comfort come to us in the midst of the Easter Season in which we celebrate Christ's victory over death. There is no more appropriate time for celebrating the life of Christian who has died.

The setting of today's scripture is prior to Jesus' death. It continues Jesus' farewell to his disciples at his last meal .

They are understandably anxious, baffled and fearful at the thought of being without him.

We have the same reactions in the face of a death of someone we love, don't we? There's this sense of disbelief that the person we love is no longer with us. We are bereft and alone as never before even within the presence of loving friends and family—the finality of knowing we can't go where he or she has gone –that we can't have that person's presence with us is difficult to fully comprehend.

Thomas and Phillips' questions to Jesus reflect these feelings. When Jesus says, “And you know the way to the place where I am going,” Thomas shoots back in anguish, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

And Phillip says, “Lord, show us the father and we will be satisfied.”

Its at times like this when we need very concretely to have some answers, some assurance of what happens when we die and how those of us who are still here can possibly go on. Its times like this when we want all our doubts solved once and for all—Just write it big on the wall for us, Jesus, please! Pull back the curtain and show us God. And we'll be satisfied.

Jesus' doesn't disappoint Thomas or Phillip or any of us. He wants us to understand three things:

First, there is a place for us in God's house. “In my Father's house are many

¹ --Larry Davies, "Ship of Fools or Lifeboat to Heaven?"
www.sowingseedsofffaith.com/ShipofFools.htm,
March 23, 1999.

rooms....I go to prepare a place for you.” This, Jesus tells us, is a given.

“And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself so where I am you may be also.” One day, he tells us we will be reunited with him. This is the promise of eternal life.

Second, we will not only go on without him, we will do even greater things than he has done!

The disciples can not imagine how they will go on without Jesus. We feel this same concern when a loved one dies. How will we ever manage without our beloved? We will manage, Jesus says because we have a place in the Father’s house.

In ancient Israel, the term “house” meant family.² Jesus is telling the disciples that they and we are all apart of God’s family. We understand Jesus and God are one in relationship. But I don’t think we see ourselves in that bond in quite the same way because we do not consider ourselves part of the Trinity—which we are not.

So Jesus’ second promise is something pretty stunning. He says to us that because we as his disciples are a part of him and he is apart of God we are part of God’s family in the same way that he is God’s Son. He says to us, “The relationship of the Father and the Son is not exclusive of us! We ARE included! Jesus is not saying we are God.

He is saying that because of our kinship with him God gives to us the same power and authority he gave to Jesus to carry on his ministry and to do even greater things than Jesus did!

Did any of you watch the Bill Moyers program on PBS Saturday evening? It dealt with the problem of hunger and poverty in the world and its affects on children in particular. My mother was in tears, telling me that for 80 years her heart has burned for starving children. In her childhood in particular she hurt for the children of

China during the Japanese invasion there. She felt nothing had changed. But the message of the show, as despairing as the situation is in certain countries was one of hope and possibility for overcoming the conditions that make for despair.

The Moyers’ program took us on a documentary look at some of the poorest countries in the world where child slavery of girls is a given means for poor families survival and where even a high school education does nothing to alleviate conditions for children living in war torn countries where so many are displaced from their homes and villages and where AIDS has left untold numbers of youngsters orphaned. Moyers’ guest was a Lutheran Minister in mission to the hungry in these areas. Moyers asked how he managed to go on in the midst of such awful circumstances.

What he said was that as dire as the situation is the knowledge that many thousands have actually made their way out of poverty because of efforts to improve conditions in other countries gives him hope. He knows it can be done.

In the midst of pain and grief when we feel overwhelmed and helpless, Jesus’ promise is one of hope of a good life after this life, but it also much, much more —His is a promise that we too have his power to accomplish the same works he did.

This life, he is telling us is not just an experience of suffering for so many in our world with no choice for us in first world countries other than an incapacitating sense of powerlessness, consequent resignation and denial. God provides us what we need to make it otherwise! The very power and authority that he gave to Jesus he gives to us.

But we need, Jesus says to believe. “Believe in God believe also in me....Very truly I tell you, the one who believes will also do the works I that I do and in fact will do greater works than these because I am going to the father.”

Belief is the saving path. Belief that Jesus knows the way to God, is telling us the truth that he is where life for ourselves and for all is to be

² William Louder, *First Thoughts on Lectionary*.

found. This is what Jesus' words to us, that he is the way, the truth and the life mean. No one can come fully into God's presence without understanding this reality about the world—that the only power available to us—power that is truly power-full—truly life saving, death conquering, life changing, evil overcoming—the ONLY POWER that can defeat the evils we deplore—comes from outside of ourselves and yet when we believe is apart of us, a gift to us as Jesus' disciples. When we believe.

And what is belief? Its not an absence of doubt or questions—its not about the right answers as Scott preached so well last week. Belief, bottom line, is about trust. And trust is about relationship. Relationship with him, Jesus tells us is what gives us the authority and power to live and work and act in God's name.

Sister Theresa is a perfect example. Scott referred to her in his sermon last week reminding us she had her dark night of the soul—her dogging doubts, her feelings of God's absence for years and yet, in spite of feeling at times a complete absence of any presence of Christ in her life she trusted and remained faithful. As a result she found she had the power to do amazing wonders day in and day out for the destitute of Calcutta. She was faithful and in her faithfulness she was powerful. What a tremendous role model for the rest of us! God's power works through us when we trust in spite of our own feelings of inadequacy, or doubt or questioning.

The third promise of Jesus is that when we have seen him we have seen God. He says, *"Whoever has seen me has seen the father."*

I find Jesus a trustworthy person. For me Jesus is a window through which I see the fullest understanding of God' presence as I have in no other human being living or dead. I see shades of God's presence in many people who have lived in the past—but I do not see the same fullness there—the completeness or fullness of God as I do in Jesus. I see in him the fullest example of what it means to be a truly human being. There are many wonderful Christians and other great persons of different faiths than ours

who exemplify lives of service and extraordinary humanity. But none of them is as full or as complete in mirroring or incarnating God's will as this man Jesus. None of them offers a saving way—a power greater than the limitations of human beings to what ails us as individuals or as a race of beings. When I see Jesus' I trust that I truly see God.

Do I see myself capable of doing as he did? Nope. And I never will. But I don't have to trust myself. But I am willing to trust I can because HE tells me I can. I believe him—I trust him even as I do not believe or trust in my own limited capacity.

We have no further need to feel insecure about what will happen to us after we die because he has promised us we will be in God's presence with him.

The trickier part, Jesus tells us, is to live and work in the present where God calls us to Christ's ongoing mission of love and wholeness. Everyone who trust in him CAN do this is his promise to us. Here is an example:

"The room was quiet save for the whisper of waves along the shore of the retreat center on Long Island Sound. Henri Nouwen had just returned from Holland, where he had shared with his beloved mother her last painful weeks with cancer. Emotionally and physically spent, Henri hunched intently over a sheaf of blank white paper, pen in hand. He was beginning the story of his mother's final struggle, later published under the title *In Memoriam*³ Knowing that with his mother's death he had lost his emotional sea anchor -- the stabilizing force in his energetic, far-flung life, he was asked why he was writing this manuscript. "Because," he responded, "I always try to turn my personal struggles into something helpful for others."⁴

Henri Nowen is someone who understood Jesus' promise of power and authority. Henri spent most of his vocation as a Christian living in

³ (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1980).

⁴ John S. Mogabgab, *Weavings*, September-October 1998, 2. A United Methodist spiritual life magazine.

a community of developmentally disabled adults where he had daily responsibility for the care of one such person.

A humble man, he nevertheless allowed the power of the Risen Christ to change lives through him with his writings. Although he is dead now, his books on about the realities of the journey of faith continue to empower and grow millions of disciples who seek as he did to turn their personal struggles into transformation for others.

Jesus promises us we can overcome because we are one with him, one with God, one with each other and in mission to all the world. This is what eternal life is, now and in the life to come.

Pastor Ronald Patterson tells us in a sermon, "People of faith, by the power of God in Jesus Christ, nothing that is lost will not be found. Nothing that is closed will not be opened, nothing that ends will be without a new beginning."

Alleluia! Amen.