Easter 5  Following Jesus, the Way to Life in Abundance  John 14:1-14

A sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church on May 14, 2017 by the Reverend Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector.

Today is a special day in the life of our parish. At both our 9 and 11:15 services we will be marking a special rite of passage for over 20 of our young people and their families. Rite 13, as it is called, acknowledges the journey a young adolescent makes from childhood towards wisdom, faithfulness, and responsibility.

I want to say a few words today about adolescence, which most dictionaries will tell you has its root in the Latin verb *adolescere*, which is made up of two parts, *ad* meaning “toward” and *alescere* meaning “to grow”. If we take our cue from Mr. Webster, adolescents are young people who are on the way to becoming what we call “grown-ups”. I don’t know about you, but while the time when I chronologically fit into the cohort known as “adolescence” is long behind me there are many days on which I still find it hard to think of myself as a “grown-up”.

Like Frederick Buechner, “I am a hybrid, an adult adolescent to whom neither term alone does full justice.”

Buechner, with his great gift with language, offers an alternate etymology of adolescence. He proposes that the “...word adolescent is made up of the Latin preposition *ad* meaning “toward,” and the Latin noun *dolor*, meaning “pain”. In offering this alternative Buechner notes that adolescence is a time of life that carries with it awkwardness, uncertainty, and pain, but even more he believes it is also a time when one learns that in life there is no escape from pain. In adolescence we come to realize that our parents and other grown-ups whom we have depended upon to shield us from pain are powerless to do so, much as they would like to do so. But if adolescence is an awakening to the suffering and pain of life, it is also the beginning time in which we are invited to learn lessons that pain might teach us and to turn our pain into ways of coming closer to God and one another.

The Gospel lesson we just heard is often associated with funeral liturgies. Part of the 5 chapter long “farewell discourse” in John’s gospel, these words of comfort and promise are spoken at that Passover meal Jesus shared with his friends before one of them would betray him and the rest would abandon him. I want to call your attention to two verses of this text.

“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?” Br. Geoffrey Tristram notes that the word translated “dwelling place” is the Greek word *monai*. Tristram clarifies “monai”...”doesn’t mean a house, certainly not a mansion!—but a stopping place: rather like a wayside shelter, where a traveler could rest a night or two on a journey. It was the custom in the East for travelers to send someone ahead to prepare the next shelter along the road, so that when they arrived they might find comfort as well as shelter.” In this text Jesus tells us that he is that person for us—the one who goes ahead to prepare the way for us. Even if the next phase of
our life journey seems daunting and scary, Jesus wants us to know, “I have gone before you to prepare a place for you.”

The second verse of this text to which I want to call your attention are Jesus’ words in response to Thomas’ question, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” While there are many things to be said about this passage, there is one thing that I think should never be said and that is that only Christians will go to heaven.

Last Sunday’s gospel reading from the 10th chapter of John’s gospel was another of the “I am” statements of Jesus; I am the good shepherd. In that passage we again heard words of great comfort, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” But lest we think we Christians alone have been singled out to receive God’s favor, Jesus goes on to say, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

So what are we to make of Jesus’ response to Thomas, “I am the way, the truth, and the life?” Could it be that following Jesus is more important than knowing stuff about Jesus? More important than worshipping Jesus? The first name used in the Book of Acts to describe the early Christian community is “people of the way”. Here, to my way of thinking, is where we find a connection with that journey to adulthood that you our faithful Rite 13 participants model for us today.

What does it mean to follow the way of Jesus? One of my teachers, Henri Nouwen, described the way of Jesus as a journey of “downward mobility”. That passage about the good shepherd makes this “downward way” very clear. In this world there are thieves who come to prey upon sheep. There are also hired hands who are supposed to care for the sheep, but when thieves or wolves come after the sheep, think first of themselves and run away. Jesus, the good shepherd, like a first responder, instinctively places himself between the sheep and those who would hurt or steal them. He even lays down his life so the sheep will be safe.

I suppose, if we are honest, few of us find it easy to choose the way of Jesus. The call to grow and change can make us feel insecure and scared. We all want to be liked. We don’t want people to run the other way when they see us coming. We certainly don’t want to lose our lives if we can help it. So we are tempted to conform. That becomes awfully easy in a life of faith and the life of the church.

But Jesus didn’t die on the cross and be raised so we might be comfortable. Jesus’ death and resurrection is meant to lead us into larger life, lives full of meaning and hope; lives invested in working for truth and justice, reconciliation and peace, not characterized by fear, self-interest, and personal security.
If adolescence is the stage in life when we become aware of the pain and brokenness of this world, it is also the stage in which we are most ready to follow Jesus. When you reach adulthood—I’m talking chronologically now—one often is tempted, when he or she finds a comfortable wayside shelter, to stop there for good. This is what the world calls wisdom. There are battles you can’t win so it is ok to be resigned to evil, to turn inward and take a rest. But if we give in to that temptation we miss out on the larger life Christ longs for us to experience.

The good news of Easter is that Jesus’ way of suffering love and downward mobility leads to truth and life in abundance. Christ’s resurrection is God’s triumph over everything that would crush, demean, and fragment us. It is also a refining fire in which everything within us that would lead us away from the way of Christ must be purified,--our preconception of how things must be, our anger or bitterness or victimization, our desire to scapegoat others, and our fear of the unknown.

The good news of Easter to which you, my young friends, bear witness today by your choice to follow Jesus’ way in your life is that he tells us we don’t need to be afraid. I am going before you to prepare a place for you and I will come back and walk with you on the way. There is something much bigger and better in life than personal freedom and success and achievement. It is, in the prophet’s words, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

In the spirit of the Risen Christ who has brought you to this day and walks with you day by day, let me close with a favorite Benediction:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done to bring justice and kindness to all people.