

## **Ask Questions** John 14:1-14 (Easter 6A)

Now What? What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do sermon series

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In 2019, I went on a trip to Yellowstone National Park with some good friends. I'd never been and was excited to see this gorgeous region of our country and to hike some of the beautiful trails located in the 2.2 million acres home to this national park. We saw vibrant hot springs, breathtaking views, and Old Faithful herself. I read a little before we left about what to expect and what to pack to have a fun and safe experience. But mostly, I went along for the ride, happy to tag along with a group of people which included some Type A planners who I knew would take care of the details.

On our last day full day, we went on one final hike. After a decent ascent up a hill, the trail opened into this beautiful field. I remember taking this photo thinking how I'd love to build a tiny house by this stream of water and call it home. What a view to wake up to each day.

Not long after we passed this water area, the trail disappeared, and some of our group had differing thoughts on where to go next. I had zero clues and zero concerns about where we were and how to get to the trailhead. I was up for the adventure, and I knew we could always retrace our steps if worse came to worse.

Without cell service, we relied on our sense of direction and the memory of those who had researched the hike beforehand. We eventually got down to two conflicting opinions on what to do next. I hadn't said much, and someone asked what I thought. Without hesitation, I pointed at one guy in our group and said, "I trust him. I think he knows the way." Now, one of the things I knew about this guy was that he was an avid researcher and liked and needed to be competent and knowledgeable. It is the way he is wired. He would not have set out on that hike without researching it thoroughly beforehand. If he said we should go this way, we should go this way.

After a little more discussion, the group opted to follow his lead, and before long, we arrived at the next trailhead. This young man had enough class not to say aloud, "I told you so." But I'm pretty sure he said it to himself.

I didn't have a map or GPS. If I had a compass, I wouldn't have known how to use it to find my way out. But I had a person, and I trusted him because I knew him, his character, and I was confident he knew the way. All I had to do was follow him, and he'd show us the way home. The way was his job. Mine was to trust, follow, and not let my heart be troubled, but rather learn to savor the journey without having all the answers about what was next.

But that was just a hike in the woods, and the guy was literally right in front of me, visible to my eyes.

If this was a story about my life following Jesus, it would have sounded more like, "Jesus, are you sure this is the right way?" "Hey, Jesus, I'm pretty sure we should have taken a left back there." "What kind of miserable, rocky, uphill climb are you taking me on?" "Lord, I'd rather just turn back now. It wasn't great, but I like the known rather than the unknown. I don't know if I can do what's ahead." "Jesus,

could we sit for a minute, let me catch my breath, and then, you show me the rest of the trail ahead before we take any more steps? How many miles left? What is the terrain and elevation? Any chances of unfriendly wildlife? Did you bring the bear spray, Jesus?"

When it comes to following Jesus, I have a thousand questions, just like the disciples. Author Len Sweet calls them the "duh-sciples." All the Gospels seem to delight in pointing out how the disciples just don't get it sometimes, and our text today is another example.

But first, let's begin with some context.

The lectionary readings for the Sundays after Easter are full of instructions for the disciples on how to live without Jesus's physical presence. Jesus died. Now what? Jesus is alive again, but different and left again. Now what?

Our text today is part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus, found only in the Gospel of John. The setting is the Upper Room where Jesus and his closest disciples gathered the Thursday before the death of Jesus. He knew that night he would be handed over to death, and he tried to prepare his friends for the harsh transition and the painful distance that was coming. Jesus wanted to prepare their hearts and minds for what is to come, even while he carried the burden of what awaited him. That's love.

Jesus washed their feet. They finished the meal together. Jesus told them one of them will betray him, and then told Judas to go and do what he must do. Then, Jesus told Peter that Peter will deny knowing Jesus three times before all is said and done. Jesus told them he was going away, and they can't go where he is going. Things were falling apart fast around Jesus and the disciples. I imagine it felt like the wheels were coming off the bus.

No wonder the Eleven were troubled and full of questions. They looked side-eyed at these brothers they lived and journeyed with for three years, wondering who can we trust. Where's Jesus going? Why is he leaving? They have big questions and few answers. Rev. Shannon Michael Pater wrote, "When their hopeful visions for a just and peaceful messianic kingdom melt in the crucible of crucifixion, the hearts of the disciples will be diseased—and their anxiety will be blinding." After three years of teachings, miracles, signs and wonders, this was not how it was supposed to end. Now what? Their hearts were very much troubled.

No wonder Jesus' next words are words of reassurance and comfort.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." (v.1)

It's hard having to dwell in the unknown. We sit with the unknowns, thinking tomorrow will be clearer, only to face new questions and concerns the next day. The disciples lived in a state of unknowing too, even while being physically present with Jesus.

While he is still with them, before his hour comes, before everything becomes unbelievably dark and confusing for the disciples, Jesus shares with them what is given to them to help them know what to do next, and if they trust him, their hearts will not be troubled.

*"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." V.2*

The key to this passage is “abiding” which is a common theme in John that describes a relationship, not architecture. John did not imagine a mansion, but rather the expansive presence of God. Jesus tells his friends that there’s plenty of room in the presence of God, not just in a future time, but in the present. Jesus abiding with God did not start when he died. It was a description of how he lived. This is true for us, too. It is not about where we live in the ‘afterlife,’ but where we live in the present. Jesus tells them, “Let not your hearts be troubled. You have a place, and it is in the presence, the very bosom or heart of God, and it is available now for you to abide and dwell in. If you dwell in the wide-open presence of God, your hearts will not remain troubled.

“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.” (v.2-5)

“Um, Jesus?”

“Yes, Thomas.”

“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (v.5)

Any one of us might have asked this, or at least thought it like the other ten who didn’t speak up. Lord, we’re gonna need a map or coordinates. Do we take I-42 north to Galilee, or head south back to Bethany? Do we need to get a boat to head west in the Great Sea? Are you going to need another donkey? With a troubled heart, Thomas’s voice gets a little higher and faster. “We need a little bit more to go on, Lord.”

Jesus heard Thomas’s question, and ours, of wanting more clarity, and responded again with words of comfort. “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.” (v.6-7)

Theologian Bill Hull once suggested a reason why the disciples might have been confused about Jesus’ assertion. “He had claimed to be ‘the way,’ yet his path led straight to a cross; to be ‘the truth,’ yet he could convince none of the religious leaders to embrace his cause; to be ‘the life,’ yet he would be dead in less than twenty-four hours!”

Needing more clarity still, Philip has a question and asks for a clearer picture. “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” (v.8)

Sometimes words of comfort aren’t always comforting at first. Has someone ever reminded you that God is near during a hard time and have you ever wondered in response... but how? Where is God? What does that even mean? It is not that we doubt God is near, but we have trouble understanding **how** God is near. With troubled hearts beating faster, we plead, Lord, give us a bit more information on what, when, where, why and how.

“Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves.” (v.9-11)

Philip asks. “Show us the Father.” And in reply Jesus tells him “You’ve been seeing him all along.” In me. And if my words aren’t enough for you, then at least remember all the things you have seen me do.

Jesus’ meaning becomes clear: “Guys, it’s not about knowing information, how-to’s, directions, or instructions: it’s about knowing me, trusting me! Stay in relationship with me, abide in me, and I’ll get you to the place where you belong – the kingdom of God, knowing God, living in relationship with God – the place that I’ve been telling you about from the beginning!” In this way, “I am the way ... there’s no other way apart from me” is a restatement of reassurance: “Trust in God, trust also in me. Don’t let your hearts be troubled – trust me!”

Like Thomas and Philip and even Peter at the end of John 13, there is room in our relationship with God for honest confusion, confession of our need for control, admission of our frustration when our requests seem to go unheard. We are invited to continue to trust and abide in Jesus even as we make our requests.

In his writings, German priest and theologian Martin Luther asked what it means to have a God and answers that God is what you hang your heart upon. Cynthia Jarvis puts it this way, “The heart that is troubled is a heart not hung upon God but hung rather on all the things the world peddles to soothe a troubled heart.”

Perhaps the question for us is what are we hanging our hearts on?

*Is your heart hung up on what’s next?* Wondering with anxiety about your future or your kid’s future. On Friday night, I sat on metal bleachers with hundreds of family members and friends to celebrate the graduation of 408 high school graduates. We wonder what’s next for them. They wonder what’s next for them. There were lots of cheers, but just as many unanswered questions about what’s next. Some of you will sit with those cheers and questions today for your graduation ceremonies. We are anxious over what is next for our health, our finances, our relationships, our country. These anxieties are real, and we need to name them. But that’s not where we hang our heart. It’s not where we dwell.

*Is your heart hung up on things lost?* An end to expectations and dreams like the disciples experienced. Missed opportunities and relationships. Missed people. No matter how grave or how trivial, these losses are real. And they are to be grieved. But that’s not where we hang our heart. It’s not where we dwell.

*Like the disciples, is your heart hung up on the unknown?* You’re in good company. It’s ok to have questions and to wish and even ask for a little more clarity. You can bring all those feelings with you as you dwell with God, but clarity and certainty can’t be where we hang our hearts.

Jesus tells the disciples in their time of deep uncertainty, hang your hearts on God; hang your hearts on me. My friends, Jesus wants to comfort us just as he did the disciples in that room during their times of uncertainty, when they wondered “now what?”. There are things we cannot know or understand, but we are given things that will help us when we don’t know what to do. Jesus invites us to abide with and in the presence of God, and Jesus is the way and has shown us God. Feel your feelings, but don’t let your hearts be troubled. Hang your heart up on God, whose heart is big enough for all of you.<sup>i</sup>

As we journey with God on this hike of life, we don’t have all the details. We don’t have a detailed map. We don’t have a full itinerary. We don’t have GPS. We have Jesus. Like my friend in Yellowstone, the

way is Jesus's domain. Jesus is the way home. Jesus is the way to be at home with God. Our domain is to trust, to abide, to follow, to not let our hearts be troubled, but to hang our hearts on God.

At the end of his farewell discourse in John 16:12, Jesus tells them, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Jesus is saying, "You're gonna have to trust me." You can't have all the details you want to have, but you have me, you'll always have me even if I'm not physically with you. We've prepared a place for you. God is with you. I am with you. Abide with us.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cathedralatl.org/sermons/what-are-you-hanging-your-heart-on/> - with credit for the "Are you hung up" series of reflections.