

“We May Not Easily See God’s Presence or Even Hear God’s Message”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Mother’s Day and Christian Family Sunday

Scripture Readings: I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

(Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Some days are like this. We simply have so many concerns and needs all around us, and people to remember and honour, and events to lift up and celebrate, that we make sure (despite our best intentions) we honour none of them and forget everything that is significant.

So today is Mother’s Day, and a time to remember mothers, to send flowers or go out for dinner, or possibly to visit a grave, or to look at pictures that are significant. We may gather with family as part of the remembrance that mothers – both living and dead – often are a key part of families.

Then we have in Sudbury today the run for diabetes, and the need to support causes that are important. Maybe we need to go for a walk or run for our own exercise program after church, or maybe some of our people are away opening up camps or checking on summer homes.

Then some university students are off to their summer abode, or starting a new job for the summer, or maybe even the first job after graduation.

There is so much on our minds, to which we should turn our attention, can we ever keep up?

Many of us walk a fine line between having life under control and feeling pushed and pulled in a variety of directions. Some feel confident about the future and others sense that the future is uncertain and scary. Some relax with a sense of divine assurance while others are not assured at all.

Let me be clear and bold: those feelings are not 21st century realities. People have felt such a gamut of emotions from the earliest of times. That is why Jesus offers hope and comfort to his disciples by letting them know that they need not feel alone, and there is a place of significance and substance to which they will go into eternity. “Do not fear,” says Jesus, “in my Father’s house there are many places for you to find peace and rest.”

The Disciples seem confused, uncertain, anxious, even disbelieving. “How can we be sure of all of this?”

“You know what to do,” says Jesus.

“How can we know what to do and where to go – who do you think we are?”

“I am the way, the truth and the life,” says Jesus. And then they are really confused and upset.

We all are like that when we are anxious. We have trouble thinking through what we are to do, and accepting certain situations that may be outside of the norm. And once we lose that confidence and inner self-awareness, then it takes a while to regain that strong, purpose-driven inner self.

Misplace your keys, and try finding them. You can retrace your steps and remember all the places you have been since seeing them for the last time, but the answer as to their current whereabouts may not be so simple. Once our rhythm of regular activity hits a bumpy patch, anxiety and worry may set in where previously calm and confidence resided. When that happens, keys may remain lost for a very long time.

Jesus is offering in the Lukan passage today a breath of calm in an increasingly tense circumstance. He knows there is anxiety among his group, and he is trying to fend off the worry of the disciples when they are not really clear what Jesus' future will be. Jesus, by assuring the disciples before they may face a crisis, gives them some reserve to face what might come their way.

FBI director James Comey was fired this week. That may not be news to most of you, and may be the last thing you need to hear yet again as you gather for worship in church, but did you hear or read what Comey had to say in the wake of the firing? In so many words, the letter began: "I have long believed that a President can fire an FBI director for any reason, or for no reason at all. I am not going to spend time on the decision or the way that it was executed. I hope you won't either. It is done, and I will be fine, although I will miss you and the mission deeply."

It is a government officer modern day letter of encouragement much as Jesus offered to his disciples when worried about what was coming next.

We tend not to do that. We live in an age where heightened fear and worry dominates life. And so this week's *Time* magazine – yes, the one dated May 15, 2017 – has a red cover with the gripping words: "**WARNING: WE ARE NOT READY FOR THE NEXT PANDEMIC.**"

The article may be summarized with a simple sentence: Science has the knowledge (for the most part) to handle a medical crisis, but our governments are slow in getting our systems ready to handle a potential disaster. Even *Time* magazine now has adopted the process of the tabloids – make a headline so salacious it will upset people enough they may buy your publication, only to be disappointed when they read the article that it does not fulfill the hype of the cover line.

Jesus was not one to build up hype and raise anxiety. He wanted people to know that they need not fear the future, and they should simply carefully listen to what he taught and pay attention to how he lived. That was all that was needed to be successful. And in the end, God will take care of you.

Jesus was not about to create news and perpetrate alarming headlines to proclaim what the rest of his life might be about. He was more like the New York Times writers featured in the new documentary *Obit*. The documentary features the writers of famous obituaries

that have appeared in the *New York Times* over the years – often 800 words highlighting a famous individual’s unique life, but also sharing information of what made that individual tick – aspects unknown possibly during their famous lifetime. One of those obit writers, Margalit Fox, responding to the question as to why these obituaries are not inherently depressing, points out: “Obits have next to nothing to do with death, and, in fact, absolutely everything to do with life.”

That is the key – no matter how much Jesus himself faced uncertainty and anger, judgment and even eventual death, he wanted his disciples to be focussed on their lives and ministry.

It is a message we need all the more today. As we hear about people drowning in flood waters, and being shot in their homes and neighbourhoods, as we hear of another person dying from our community and another family facing sadness and loss, as we hear horrendous stories of famine and starvation in parts of northeastern Africa, we need a message that allows us the opportunity – even gives us permission—to think about life and acceptance and a place of comfort and rest.

In the end, Jesus did not want the essence of his message to be hijacked, for the essence of what he came to say was: “I have come to give you live in abundance,” and strong people can see and accept that abundance of life no matter what they have faced, or are facing now.

And so may we hear anew the words of hope: “In my Father’s house are many places to rest, and I go and prepare a place for you to know that you and your loved ones are to be welcomed in that place as a child of God.”