

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections based on this week's lectionary readings

May 18, 2014

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A

The readings this week:

- Acts 7:55-60 ◦ Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
- 1 Peter 2:2-10 ◦ John 14:1-14

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Many Rooms

Many years ago, a recurring dream began to take hold of my nighttime brain. The details shift and change each time it visits, but the essence of the dream remains the same: I am wandering through shops—not a mall, but a series of connected stores. The stores are the kind that I love to browse through, the sort that I find in communities that value artistry. As I wander among the stores that spill into one another, I savor what I see: richly hued artwork, finely crafted jewelry, beautiful pottery that calls out for me to touch it.

In the dream, no matter the changing details, I always find a bookstore. Often it's a used bookstore, crammed with volumes and with more shelves around each turn. Once the bookstore contained a case of gorgeous hand-bound books, displayed like artwork. I marveled at the colors, textures, and designs, knowing as I touched the books, *I want to do this, to create books like these.*

Along with the persistent presence of a bookstore, one other detail of the dream never changes: it always begins with my walking down a familiar street. I turn a corner and suddenly find myself among the shops, thinking, *Of course—that's where they were!* These treasures were in my neighborhood the whole time, waiting for me to find them.



And you know the way to the place where I am going,

Jesus says to his disciples on the night before his death. Here at the table where they share their final meal before his crucifixion, there are many things Jesus wants to tell them. His hunger for them to *know*—which we see again and again in the gospel texts in this Easter season—becomes particularly acute as Jesus gathers with them just hours before his death. And so he will go on to tell them about the Holy Spirit whom

he will send, and how this Spirit will be in them. Jesus will tell them that he is the true vine in which they will abide. He will tell them—command them—to love one another, and how the world will hate them. He will tell them that their sorrow will turn to joy. Jesus is desperate for them to know these things, and more.

But when he tells them, before all this, of the place he is preparing for them—the house with many dwelling places—Jesus tells them that they already know the way. When Thomas—ever the good questioner—asks him how they can know the way, Jesus reminds them that he himself is the way. If they know him, they know the way, and the One who sent him to prepare the way for them.

This text has me wondering if following in this way has less to do with striving and working at it, in the frenetic fashion we sometimes do, than with letting ourselves recognize what we already know; less to do with wrapping our brains around points of belief that grow so contentious than with opening our eyes to the door that has always been there in our soul, our heart, waiting for us to see it and walk through it and find the spacious dwelling place that has been there all along. To be sure, following Christ our Way takes work and effort and focus and sacrifice. Yet I find myself thinking of the poem by the Sufi poet Rumi in which he writes of how he has been living on the “lip of insanity,” as he puts it, knocking incessantly on a door. Finally the door opens, and he realizes, “I’ve been knocking from the inside!”

Here at the table, Jesus wants to make clear that although the place he describes is a someday place, a promised home that he is preparing, it is at the same time a dwelling that his followers can have a glimpse of in this world, a space that even now takes form in our midst. An abiding-place fashioned by—and fashioned of—the Christ who dwells in God, and is a dwelling place for God, and offers his own self to us as both a habitation and a way. A way that we find by opening the door that is already within us.

In this season, where are you making your home? Where are you dwelling? Is there a place in your life where you are pushing and pouring out your energy—something you are trying to wrap your brain around to understand it or to change it—when the way might lie instead in releasing, in finding the doorway that appears in letting go?

[Jan Richardson, *The Painted Prayerbook*](#)

Reflecting on the Word



"Be to me a rock of strength..."



Psalm 31:2

1st Reading: Acts 7:55-60

Where is the Gospel word of forgiveness in this passage? What famous person participated in Stephen's execution? How does the Stephen incident work into God's plan? For whom does the church pray today? And what is the concern of our intercession? Palestinian suicide bombers and the Iraqi insurgents cause many people to reflect on the idea of martyrdom. What understandings or motivations would cause someone to die for a cause, while many of their contemporaries choose to live? What scenario, if any, could you imagine in which you would give your life for Christ's cause? What would you do if faced with a "deny Christ or die" choice? [Squamish United Church of Christ](#)

Psalm Reading: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Make a list of everything you have to do and give it over to God. If God blesses you with a sense of peace, just sit for a while and enjoy his presence before you move on to study. David feels threatened. What words does he use in these verses to describe his plight? David's response to God's help is praise. What specific things does David praise God for? Consider a time in your life when you felt that others (perhaps non-Christians) held you in contempt and avoided you. How did it affect you? What was your relationship with God like at that time? What encouragement from God do you need to continue in a harsh world? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

3rd Reading: 1 Peter 2:2-10

What does the metaphor in verses 2-3 contribute to your understanding of how to nurture spiritual growth? How does belief or unbelief influence the way a person understands Jesus, the "living Stone" (vv. 4-8)? What reasons do the people here have to praise God (vv. 9-10)? *The New Bible Commentary* interprets verse 12, "the day [God] visits us," as "the day God will visit the earth and search out man's hearts in judgment." If this were to occur in your lifetime, what evidence would you want God to find of your own spiritual growth? How could today's passage help you overcome a tendency to become a spiritual Peter Pan, not wanting to "grow up" in your faith? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

4th Reading: John 14:1-14

What is troubling you? Give it to God, and wait before him to receive his comfort. How would the promises Jesus makes in verses 1-4 bring comfort to his disciples? In light of verses 5-14, why is it crucial for our focus to be on Jesus himself? Think of a friend who is going through a personal crisis. How could this chapter help you to minister to that person? How can Jesus' words help you in a personal crisis or when you have a troubled heart? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)



My husband loves rocks. Not pretty rocks or unusual rocks or interesting rocks or semi-precious stones — just plain rocks. His eyes light up when we're driving down the highway and he sees a rock slide. More than once I've had to pull over the car at a construction site to pick up rocks that are just going to be hauled away as fill. He's always astounded that someone was really about to trash them, and he's delighted to give them a new home in our gardens. Each one is placed (and often moved a couple of times) in just the right spot, highlighting its own shape and color, and focusing attention on the plants nearby. Not one of the rocks is hewn into a particular shape. Each is roughed up by construction equipment or smoothed by nature's wind and water. Together, these previously discarded, unwanted stones beautify their surroundings. The best thing a family of faith can do is remember that every single person is beautifully important to the entire community. This is a recurrent theme throughout the letters of the New Testament. The author of First Peter calls us "living stones," to be "built into a spiritual house."

We are rocks. Rocks with a purpose. And that purpose can't be accomplished if any rock is discarded.

Every idea, old or new, is needed. Every person, young or aged, is valued. Every soul, troubled or overly-satisfied or whole, is treasured. Every spirit, tired or high strung, is refreshed. Every child of God is welcomed into a house where God's other children wait with open arms.

Together with God, they are built into something beautiful.

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Praying Toward Sunday

*Rock of strength, solid, sure, steadfast...
Teach us to stand on you, sure footed and trusting in
the foundation you have created.
Smooth our sharp edges, mold us into shapes that
please, forms that support.*

*Help us bury our roots deep within you, the Living
Stone, that we may grow, that our faith may be
nourished and strengthened, and that we may reach
out to others for you, because of you.*

Amen