

5 Easter
Christ and Grace
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Acts 11:1-18, Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35
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This past week I spent 4 days on silent retreat at The Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Anglican monastery in Cambridge, MA. This monastery sits beside the Charles River and is the home of an order of Episcopal monks. I try to visit annually to be still and intentionally listen for God's voice, for the voice of the Shepherd Jesus, for the leading voice of the Holy Spirit. While there, the routine is the same – regular hours of worship with the brothers, walks along the river, meals in silence that create a quiet unspoken community, and lots of prayer and listening. The rooms are all the same, so I always know what to expect. In that sense it's a comfort for me to go to the monastery and it always meets my expectations.

However, there is always the knowledge that once I arrive and turn off the cell phone, stop checking emails, and enter the silence, that my life expectations are likely to be gently nudged, or firmly redirected, or flat out turned upside down. I never know the ways God will speak to me and lead me in the silence and I approach it each time with some fear and trepidation, but also with curiosity and hope for transformation and newness of life, difficult as it might prove to be.

Perhaps you know something of the way life can interrupt your expectations, your plans and assumptions? A long awaited baby is born with challenges you had not expected that will change the vision you had for this child. A college experience turned out to be the wrong option for the gifts God gave you. The marriage fell apart, the prodigal child did not return, or the diagnosis changed the retirement plans. We all have expectations – some we can count on like sunrise, the phases of the moon, particular hymns in church for Christmas and Easter; while others are dashed on the rocks of circumstance. Let me be clear that I do not believe God dashes our expectations. I do believe that when our expectations are dashed that God will come into that situation bringing new life.

In our reading from Acts, Peter is leading a community made up of Jews and Gentiles and the expectation was that the Gentiles would accept the Jewish laws for purity. This expectation was dashing the hopes for a community of new Christians who could not see a way to move forward in unity. But God interrupts this expectation with a vision that gives Peter a new understanding, a new way of being that so alters Peter's assumptions, so changes his life, that he recounts this vision three times in the story of the Acts of the Apostles. Surely letting go of the Jewish purity laws would have seemed impossible to Peter. Surely Peter imagined it would be impossible for the Jewish Christians in his community to accept that God might be creating newness of life for them.

In Revelation we hear from John's vision that God is making all things new, and that God will comfort and wipe every tear of those who weep. We hear that though there may be death, whether it be literal or of a way of being, that the one seated on the throne will make all things new again, in God's time. Those of us who have experienced a profound loss know this to be true, that the very unexpectedness of loss brings grief and needs time to grieve and heal.

In the Gospel reading Jesus shares his final meal with the disciples. He knows he cannot be bodily present with his disciples forever; he also knows that his leaving will be upsetting. As their leader Jesus knew he would disappoint the disciples by doing precisely what was needed to bring about the Kingdom of God. He knew they would struggle with loss and grief as they found new ways of being followers of Jesus after his ascension.

But they were not yet ready to hear him even though he told them multiple times that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.

The disciples were human, as are we. Most of the time we focus on going to Jerusalem, meeting life's expectations. Most of the time we don't want to talk about change, we try to avoid any suffering and we fear death. Detaching from someone or from a way of being is hard; sometimes it will mean suffering, it will feel like death. But for Christians, the physical end is not the end, it is the place where new life begins. It's where God gives the vision for newness of life and hope and possibility.

What Jesus knew about the disciples is what God knows about all of us. We like things to stay the same, we are uncomfortable with change, and it is heart breaking to lose people we love and to face the loss of way of being. What the disciples didn't yet know is that although Jesus would no longer be physically with them, the things he taught them would sustain them. And to help them move through the change and grief he gave them a new commandment – love one another as I have loved you.

What we can trust as the Body of Christ in this place, is that while things are always changing in this world, while people we love do leave us, called to new ways of life or life eternal, we as disciples will continue to love one another, learning to be the Body of Christ in new ways.

The road to Jerusalem leads to the Kingdom of God. It's lined with our hopes and expectations, and also our suffering and death; transforming and raising us from old ways of being into newness of life. We are all on the road to Jerusalem and God will more than likely nudge, redirect, or turn upside down our expectation for the journey ahead. I love being on this journey with you as we watch with joy to see where God takes us. May we be open to God's work in us, God's vision for us, and God's promise to us of new life in Christ. Amen.