

Easter 5 Sermon
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Today's readings start out on a pretty depressing note. The events take place pretty early on in the books of Acts. The early Church was expanding so rapidly that Christ's apostles started calling people to support ministries to help them—specifically to help them in redistributing the wealth of those living in Christian communities to help care for widows. One of these people that was chosen was Stephen, the protodeacon, the very first person to be ordained as a deacon in the Christian church. Now Stephen was a very faithful person, and we are told that he “did great wonders and signs among the people.” The temple authorities were intimidated by Stephen's faith, his power, and his strong testimony in support of the Gospel, so they brought false blasphemy charges against him. But Stephen would not relent, and he continued to share his testimony. As we hear in today's reading, this angered those gathered at the temple, and so they rushed together against Stephen, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him. Thus the protodeacon of the church quickly becomes the protomartyr—the first Christian to be martyred for their faith.

When we first look at this reading, it seems extremely tragic. This man named Stephen seemed to be a good and faithful person, having such strong character that he was chosen to fairly distribute goods to the less fortunate in his Christian community, and serving as a deacon in the Church. He steadfastly and eloquently defended his faith as he performed signs and wonders among the people in his area. And yet those very qualities are what put Stephen on the radar of those who felt threatened by the Christian church. And it was those very qualities that enraged his enemies so deeply that they condemned him to a painful death by stoning. Yes, this story clearly seems to be quite tragic. Yet there is a different side to this story when viewed in the light of our Christian faith. Yes, on one hand Stephen's death was tragic, but on the other hand it was glorious—not because it firmly cemented his name into fundamental Christian history, but because of what death means to a Christian.

Nearly 2000 years ago, Jesus shared in the last Passover supper he would ever partake in with the twelve apostles. And there he reminded them of the work he came into this world to accomplish—to take away the sin of the world and open the way of everlasting life. But this work would require a great sacrifice—it would require Christ to give up his life—to die a slow and painful death on the cross. Because of this, Christ was instructing the apostles on how they were to live and continue his ministry after his death, telling them, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Though that was a nice sentiment, all of this talk was, understandably, scaring the disciples. They did not want to think about what their lives would be like if Jesus were to die. So even though this was not new information for the apostles, the fact that Jesus was telling them that his death was imminent finally made this fact real for these disciples—Jesus was going to leave them.

And it is in this moment that we can see the deep love that Christ has for his apostles. Many times when the disciples misunderstand or refuse to accept Jesus' teachings, Jesus corrects them. There are times when the disciples are so dense and slow to pick up on what Jesus is telling them that we can almost imagine Jesus rolling his eyes. But this time is different. Jesus knows the disciples are truly terrified, that they feel lost, that they need some sort of reassurance so that they can understand what is going to happen. So rather than correcting the disciples, or pointing out that Jesus has already taught them these things many times over, Jesus says to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus explains to them that even though they will seem to be forever separated, they will one day be reunited, even after the resurrection, and after Christ ascends to the right hand of the father and no longer walks this earth. He explains to them, “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.”

Yet the disciples are still afraid. Jesus has promised to prepare a place for them, but what if they cannot figure out how to get there? But once again Christ lovingly assures them, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Because they have known Christ they will know how to follow him to their eternal dwelling places. And these very same assurances that Christ gave to the apostles so long ago as they expressed their fear of figuring out how to live after Christ’s death—Jesus gives these assurances to us as well. It is because of these assurances that Stephen, protodeacon and protomartyr, was able to pray during his death, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” It is why Stephen’s death was not just a tragedy, but also a triumph. Because just as Christ’s death was not the end for him, so Stephen’s death was not the end for him, and so our own deaths are not the end for us.

Yes, even as Christians who are given this assurance by Christ, we may fear death because we do not know exactly what is in store for us after. And just as the apostles did, we may worry that we won’t be able to find our way into the eternal life that Christ promises us. Yet just as Christ assured Thomas when he expressed his fear about death and his concern that he would not know the way, we are reassured by Jesus. Just as Christ responds to Thomas, so he responds to us in love saying, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” We do not need to find our own way from this life into the next, because Christ has prepared a place for us, and will come again and take us to himself, so that where Christ is, we may be also.

Jesus himself tells his disciples to not let their hearts be troubled; but to believe in God and in Christ. And to believe in Christ’s promise to always be with them, even after death, so that where Christ is, they may be also. That same loving reassurance is passed on to us. This very same promise that was given to the apostles is given to all of us. It is true we may be doubtful, and fear that once we are near death we will not know how to obtain this promise for ourselves, and that we will be lost—but we know that Christ continues to love us and care for us in the midst of our doubts, just as he did for the apostles. May this love serve as a reminder of the assurance of Christ’s promise of salvation, knowing that Christ will lead us to our eternal dwelling places in that he has prepared for us in the world to come. Amen.