

Sermon Easter V Year A

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

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From the first sentence of our opening prayer, “Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life.” Eternal life is one focus of our readings in this season after Easter. But it is not just the church that is focusing on this topic; the secular press has been focused on questions of salvation, eternal life, and the rapture. We just slipped past another prediction of the world coming to an end, and I notice that we are all still here. Two weeks ago the online news sites were reporting a recent interview with the brilliant theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking. In the interview, Hawking shared his view that human brains are a lot like a computer, when the brain wears out it is done. Hawking doesn’t believe that there is any place called heaven.

While Hawking believes there is no heaven, the evangelical preacher, Rob Bell, has also been in the news regarding his view of eternal life. We know Rob Bell as the talented creator of the Nooma videos series that we have used in Adult Formation. Bell has landed in trouble with other evangelicals because of his new book. Rob Bell’s book is entitled, *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Bell describes his view that God will save everyone. Bell is not the only evangelical with such an understanding; he is just the most recent.

There seems to be no shortage of concerns about the Christian premise of eternal life. It’s as if these articles and concerns were anticipating this Sunday’s lessons for the fifth Sunday of Easter.

In our text from John’s gospel, Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the evening of the last supper. He has washed the disciples’ feet and is looking ahead to his impending arrest, but he wants to comfort his friends. John’s passage is so comforting that this is one of the gospel lessons particularly appropriate for funeral services. I suspect that is the context where we have heard this passage most often. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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.” So comforting as it focuses as our collect does on eternal life.

John goes on... “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” (Echoed in the beautiful hymn that we just sang, “the call.”) If John’s rendering of the passage stopped at this point perhaps it would not have been the

source of so much trouble. But the next phrase has caused the church and the world much distress. Jesus continues, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

For many, this passage is used to affirm an exclusive way to eternal life. This passage has been and continues to be used by some to provide a divine justification for the idea that only Christians can be saved. But it has also been used as the justification for the slaughter of peoples since the earliest days of the church. That means we need to consider this carefully. Was this passage intended as it has been used? Is Jesus not the only way?

Each gospel narrative is the author’s perspective, written to a particular context, giving a particular view of Jesus of Nazareth, his ministry and his life. Well, as Episcopalians we view scripture first of all by reflecting upon the context of the original audience. Who was John writing to? We call John’s community after him, the Johannine community. We know some things about his community and the circumstances under which John was writing. The passage was meant to provide assurance to a community of disciples who faced a very uncertain future. John is writing at a later time and place from (Matthew, Mark, and John) the other three synoptic gospel writers. Jerusalem and the Temple have been destroyed. The Jews have been exiled from Judea. The Pharisees were the sole surviving branch of Judaism other than the Jewish followers of Jesus and the Pharisees were throwing John’s community out of the synagogues. John is drawing a line here but it is a line within his culture, for his group of disciples as they faced the uncertainty around them. Quoted from William Albinger in Synthesis, Easter 5, 2011. John writes to encourage the early disciples to stay the course and to hold fast to what they had come to believe.

The people of the way, as the early Christians were known, had been in trouble with the religious authorities from the very beginning. The conflict between the religious authorities that led to the death of Jesus continued in the face of the growing Christian movement.

Stephen in our lesson from the book of Acts was one of the early persons to pattern his life upon the knowledge that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Our passage is a snippet from the end of Stephen’s life but to appreciate this passage, we must know more. In the sixth chapter of Acts, we learn that Stephen was the first deacon. The disciples felt that the demands of preaching the Word of God did not allow them the time or opportunity to look after the less fortunate. Society’s most vulnerable, those who were widowed, were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Early in the church’s life, the church decided some should be preachers and teachers and some should be deacons. So the disciples gathered and chose the first seven deacons which included Stephen. Scripture says Stephen was full of “power and grace” and he began to work great miracles and signs among the people. Through serving and caring for the needy and hungry, miracles occurred.

Word spread. Stephen's witness of caring for the least in the community, (Jew and Gentile alike) so provoked and challenged those in authority that Stephen was captured and put on trial.

Stephen was brought before the council of the Sanhedrin. Charges had been trumped up against Stephen. In response to the charges, Stephen's face shone like the face of an angel as he proceeded to recount the entire OT history in the longest speech in the book of Acts.

Stephen recited the tradition of God's acts of salvation. But the impact was to accuse his fellow Jews of faithlessness. These were faithful people who were quite attached to Moses and were concerned when Stephen said that their forbears refused to obey Moses and broke the law. They were deeply attached to their temple which Stephen said could in no way "house God." And they continued to be apostate by persecuting the prophets who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, Jesus Christ, God's intended Messiah. More than that, the present listeners have murdered that promised Son of God.

In making his case, Stephen employed the very heart of the Jewish faith against them. This was not acceptable; Stephen had to be done away with. To make matters worse, he had a vision and saw the heavens opened and the Son of Man (Jesus) standing at the right hand of God. That was the last blasphemous straw, the message to which the mob shuts its ears and rushed to do away with the messenger.

As they began to stone him, Stephen uttered the request echoed in our psalm this morning, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then Stephen looked to heaven and interceded on behalf of those who were stoning him. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen echoed the forgiving words of Jesus. Stephen was the first martyr, and many more would follow. That is what it meant to be an early follower of Jesus.

That was also the experience of John's community. So John was writing to a group of early Christians who were following the Way. He wrote to encourage them to hold fast to that which is good. To follow the path of Jesus, the path that leads to eternal life. The only path they knew. John was not writing an indictment of other religious traditions in other parts of the world, even if he was aware of them. Rather he writes with encouragement, not discrimination in mind.

As Episcopalians we look to this passage not as a way to look down on others or force their conversion. The ultimate mystery of God, we leave with God because we trust in the promises of Jesus. Jesus has gone before us and there he awaits us.

We too are called to follow the Way. The way of Stephen who served the widowed and those in need. That is the call that we are responding to in Jesus, who calls us to follow. We follow Jesus in all that we do.

This is our Episcopal stream of tradition, a tradition taught by faithful Sunday school teachers who transmit the stories of our faith to our youngest members, the newest persons grafted onto the body of Christ. This is our path, responding to the call to a life of perfect service.

The path begins at baptism, continues through Sunday school and leads to confirmation. In our recent confirmation classes we reached out in concern for others. We joined so many others from St. John's participating in Mission Lynchburg. The members of St. John's also reach out in love as we plant, weed and harvest from Lynchburg grows and so many other Outreach ministries. And for those who cannot serve in the greenhouse, we offer the excess of our organic gardening at our own Farmer's Market that begins again on June 19. (four weeks from today).

We follow the way of Jesus as we tutor children in reading or work with young people on life skills or fill our food pantry or support mission trips at home and abroad.

You see, everything is connected to everything else. We are engaged in forming a people of God's very own. We don't claim to be following the only way. God is much larger and much more mysterious than we can ever fully comprehend. But this is our path, our truth, our life, and this is how we have come to know Jesus. Because to truly know Jesus is to know everlasting life. Jesus calls us to follow him in the way that really is life. That life begins right here.