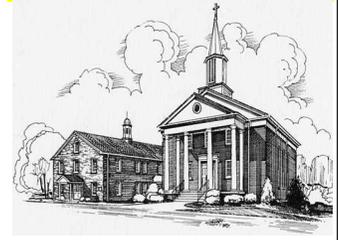


**The Lessons Appointed for Use on  
the  
Fifth Sunday of Easter**



Year A  
RCL

Acts 7:55-60  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16  
John 14:1-14

The Collect

**The Collect**

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

*Amen*

**Acts 7:55-60**

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

*In te, Domine, speravi*

- 1 In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge;  
let me never be put to shame; \*  
deliver me in your righteousness.
- 2 Incline your ear to me; \*  
make haste to deliver me.
- 3 Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,  
for you are my crag and my stronghold; \*  
for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.
- 4 Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for  
me, \*  
for you are my tower of strength.
- 5 Into your hands I commend my spirit, \*  
for you have redeemed me,  
O LORD, O God of truth.
- 15 My times are in your hand; \*  
rescue me from the hand of my enemies,  
and from those who persecute me.
- 16 Make your face to shine upon your servant, \*  
and in your loving-kindness save me."

1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to  
shame.”

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the very head of the corner”,

and

“A stone that makes them stumble,  
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God’s people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

**John 14:1-14**

Jesus said, “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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

## SERMON

“Let not your hearts be troubled.” Now, there’s some good advice! “Chill, bro. I got this”, Jesus might have said in today’s English. That, I think we can all agree, is easier said than done. Every day at 4, Kathy and I settle on the couch to watch the local news on WSAZ. By 4:30, we are both scared to death. Just imagine how the Disciples speaking with Jesus were feeling! This is the turning point in history and we modern people find it so very difficult to understand because we have so little understanding of what was before. We can, however, get a sense of what a disturbing change Jesus was making when we read of Stephen.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” But they covered

their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him

Saying that he had experienced a vision of Jesus with God made people so upset that they murdered him, yet Stephen's words show beyond rebuttal that the life and death of Jesus has power to change those affected by it. Stephen did not respond with anger or curses, but with forgiveness.

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

That, church, is an enormous change. We come to love our vision of God, and are ever at risk of forgetting that God is not limited by our notions of Him. Attacking our well-loved understanding of who and what God is can generate true rage, in Stephen's case, murderous

rage. You may remember the distress in this congregation when I noted that Islam is one of the three Abrahamic faiths. It's important to remember that John wasn't reporting an abstract discussion between scholars about this new relationship. This was a terrified bunch of fishermen who knew that they were shaking the *status quo* to its foundations. They had no illusions of the change they would carry into their world. They were all the more terrified because their leader and teacher had just told them:

<sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'<sup>1</sup>

Whenever something new comes into the world, it replaces something old and well-loved, something trusted. Giving up something well-loved and trusted can't be

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:33 NRSV

done without scaring everyone involved half to death. Nevertheless, that is just what Jesus was doing. Jesus was introducing them (and, indeed, all humanity) to a new relationship between God and humanity when He said:

No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Notice that he doesn't say, "No one comes to God except through me." He said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." "God" and "the Father" are synonymous terms to modern Christians. For First Century Jews it was not so, rather, it was a novel presentation of the relationship between God and humanity. These verses announce in clear language that the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, decisively altered the relationship between God and humanity. These words affirm that Je-

sus is the tangible presence of God in the world and that God the Father can be known only through that incarnate presence. Humanity's encounter with Jesus the Son makes possible a new experience of God as the Father.<sup>2</sup>

Entering into a new relationship with God means abandoning the old, trusted relationship. Trust is the necessary component of any relationship and trust takes time to develop. They had invested generations of trust in the old ways. Now they had to develop trust in this new way. Driving down a steep, curvy road, I usually feel pretty confident about my ability to control the car. If Kathy is driving, I'm a bit more anxious, not because she's a bad driver, but because I'm not in control. If I was in one of those driverless cars that are being experimented with, I'd be terrified no matter how well the car was operating. I would have to take many, many scary

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<sup>2</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible, Gospel of John,

rides in the driverless car before I would be able to trust it. In a way, that is the short account of Jesus' words and works up to this point – preparing His Disciples for the work that lay ahead by building trust in that new relationship. That work would be daunting, as Stephen's experience shows us.

Long ago, Buddha laid it down that the futility of most lives is due to one or other or all of five main “hindrances” that keep men back or pull them down. Jesus is addressing two of those five hindrances: Restless worry (the inability to calm the mind) and doubt (the lack of conviction or trust) when He says

“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.

Jesus is telling His Disciples to

- Believe in God.
- Believe there is a God
- Believe the new relationship between God the Father and humanity
- Believe that I am with you always.

To understand the new relationship Jesus is teaching, we need to talk about something well-loved and trusted, but which can stand in our way as we adjust to the new relationship. It is Jesus' famous words:

No one comes to the Father except through me.

For most of my life I read John's statement in the same way I suspect many of you do, as a statement of exclusion, "Christians go to heaven, sorry about the rest of you guys." Such a reading turns the Gospel upside-down! Instead of focusing our attention upon the needs of others and our relationship with God, this reading

suggests that Christianity is all about getting what I want – heaven when I die. There is a story about a group of people taking part in a Cadillac giveaway contest sponsored by a soap manufacturer. They were asked, “Why do you like Heaven Scent soap?”

One woman replied honestly, “Because I’d love to own a Cadillac.”

The Gospel must not be read as setting forth the virtues we must practice in order to get God’s friendship or favor. The Gospel is about the new relationship with God, the Father. It never crossed my mind to itemize those things I must do to make my father love me. I lived within the loving relationship that existed between us, not because of my virtues, but in spite of my failures. The incarnation changes everything for the writer of John because through the incarnation God’s relationship to humanity and humanity’s relationship to God

are decisively altered. “God” is not a generic deity who could be placated by a proper sacrifice, such as was known by the people of the time. God is the tangible presence of God’s love for the world, the one who the disciples come to recognize in the life and death of Jesus. God, the flinger of lightning bolts who must be appeased is one thing. God, who takes on flesh and even dies for His children is something quite different.

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

Today is mother's day. How many mothers ever said to your children, "Do this and I will love you." How many fathers? "God" and "Father" are synonymous to modern people. It was not so with people of Jesus' time. Remember always that God cannot be contained within your ideas of what He may do. Rather, you are contained within God's love for the world.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be  
gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give  
you peace.

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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