

Acts 8:26-40  
1 John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8  
Psalm 22:24-30

The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
April 28, 2024  
The Rev. Karen Haig

## One

It's so interesting to me that we're not hearing more of the resurrection stories in Eastertide. We did hear about Jesus appearing to the disciples in the locked room on the day of resurrection, the day Thomas had gone missing. And we heard again about the disciples in a locked room days later, when Thomas was there, and Jesus showed himself again. But that's it. Last Sunday we heard Jesus telling us he is the good shepherd who knows his sheep and calls them by name – much as he'd done with Magdalene in the garden on Easter morning. But today, and for all the rest of Eastertide, the readings take us back in time to Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus died. No stories of Jesus telling the fishermen to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, no breakfast on the beach, no encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road for Paul. No. These last three Sundays of Easter, the readings return us to the night before Jesus died, the night he knew he had to say goodbye, the night he gave the new commandment to love one another as he loves us.

So even though it feels out of sync, I'm grateful to be able to spend so much time on that night, because on that night, Jesus gave us pretty much everything we need to live as his followers in the world today. Yes, his three years of life and ministry were very important for our learning and for creating the pattern for our own lives, but on that last night, when there was so little time left, when Jesus knew he was about to die, he poured his heart out even as he prepared his disciples for life without him, even as he said his last goodbyes. Many of us have been in that place – saying goodbye to someone we know will soon die. I had that experience with Ellie just two days before she died. These are the tenderest of times, holy really. All pretense falls away and only love remains. And so we say the things that matter most. And what matters most always seems to be about love, about relationship. Abide in me as I abide in you. What do those words mean to you – Abide in me as I abide in you? What would it mean for you to abide in Jesus as he abides in you?

Some of you have heard me tell of an experience I had in the Berkeley Rose Garden many years ago. I was in seminary, my mother had recently died, and I was missing her terribly. A wise woman once told me that losing one's mother is an umbilical event – that when our mother dies, regardless of the relationship we've had with her, we're left floating around in the universe, untethered in a most unexpected way. And that's precisely how I felt on that warm summer afternoon in the rose garden. I was all alone and praying a most ineloquent but deeply meaningful and honest prayer... *"I'm so sad, I miss my mom."* As I sat there alone on the old, worn bench, the warm breeze blowing and the fragrance of a thousand roses wafting over me,

I was acutely aware of the almost physical presence of the divine. I cocked my head, and though my eyes were closed, I could see Jesus sitting on the bench next to me.

He sat, leaning forward a little with his elbows resting on his thighs, hands folded, thumbs pointing upward, his head tilted toward me, as though he was listening very, very carefully. Through my tears came the simple words *"I am so sad."* And then Jesus just slid over on the bench - not right next to me, but right into me. *"Abide in me,"* he said *"as I abide in you."* I think of that afternoon each time I hear Jesus say *Abide in me as I abide in you.*

*Abide in me as I abide in you.* Live in me as I live in you. There is something very intimate in those words, something Jesus so beautifully conveys in the way he talks about the vine grower, the vine and the branches. They are all intertwined. They are all deeply relational. And they show us so clearly, our absolute dependence on Jesus the vine, and the Father, the vine grower. It is very important for us to sink into that intimacy as we hear the words of this passage, because without the intimate, abiding, loving relationship Jesus speaks of and wants with us, some of his words can sound harsh, or even threatening.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. ... Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."*

If we take that out of context, we might think the point is figuring out whether we're a fruitful or fruitless branch. But that isn't the point. The point is that we're all intertwined – the vine grower, the vine and the branches, and when Christians separate themselves from any of those, they die. Maybe only a little, but they die. You see, without that sense of intimacy, without the experience of God's boundless love for us, it would be easy to hear those words as pre-scriptive rather than de-scriptive. Don't do that! Jesus isn't saying the Father will cut us off and throw us into the fire to die. He is describing what we feel like, what we experience when we are out of relationship with him, out of relationship with the Father, out of relationship with Christian community. Jesus is describing our experience when we won't abide in him as he abides in us. He is not saying if you don't abide in me you'll be thrown into the fire to die. While others have used those words to threaten and intimidate, Jesus doesn't use those, or any other words to do that.

The truth is, we do wither and fade and maybe even die a little when we don't take in the boundless love Jesus offers, when we distance ourselves from his forgiveness and grace, when we don't allow ourselves to abide in him as he abides in us. This abiding is what allows us to bring God's reconciling love into the world – to bear the fruits of God's kingdom. Jesus tells us God will prune the fruit bearing branches – that would be us – so that we will bear more fruit. That sounds a bit intimidating too. Pruning is hard, not just because it takes skill and understanding to know what to prune when, how much and how often, but because it means cutting off things that are alive and still growing. I am a terrible pruner. I don't mind weeding or clearing out the dead stuff, but it is nearly impossible for me to cut back growing, living things. Still, I am learning that careful pruning – pruning that takes into account the particularity and

uniqueness of each rose or shrub or fruit tree – that sort of pruning really does make things stronger, really does result in more and better fruit. I've seen it in my own garden and I've seen it in my own life... which makes the pruning God does with me more welcome, even when it's hard. I have come to understand that when Jesus talks about pruning, he's talking about loving and growing and abiding ever more deeply in God, because, he says, apart from God we can do nothing.

I've thought a lot about that this week – apart from God we can do nothing. There are a lot of good people doing great good in the world who are not Christians or people of any sort of faith at all. So how can it be that apart from Jesus we can do nothing? We need to remember that Jesus is talking to his followers, followers were feeling pretty beaten down. For Jesus to say that apart from him they could do nothing was to remind them that with him they could do everything. For those of us who are Christians, acknowledging God as the source of our everything is a profound confession of faith. And while we don't always behave as though we believe that apart from God we can do nothing, I believe our desire to live that way is real. And all this gives new and rich meaning to the reality that we are all intertwined, we are all one, and that we cannot go on without each precious and particular part... the vine grower, the vine, the branches. We really are all one.

That truth was so apparent at St Mark's Cathedral yesterday. Churches from all across western Washington gathered as unique branches, cultivated by the vine grower and given life by the vine. In Cathedral Day's glorious celebration of God's goodness and welcome and love for us all, the church, which is the people of God, showed herself to be one body made up of many unique, varied and beautiful parts. We are one because God's love abides in us and because we abide in God who is that love. When we hear it that way, we begin to see how every good thing we are and every good thing we do really does depend on God living and loving through us. When we hear it that way, we can be sure that because everything we do really does depend on Jesus, everything we do will bear the fruit of love which is God's desire for us and for all of God's beautiful, broken and beloved world. Amen.