

May 10, 2020 We Don't Face the Future with Fear John 14:1-14 Rev. Ross Leckie

This is a picture of Aty, 71 and Dirk Meeder, 72, about a month ago when they were both patients in the Covid-19 ward at Bluewater Health hospital in Sarnia, Ontario. Dirk and Aty took their four adult children on a trip to Costa Rica in February to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It has been quite a roller coaster for them over the last year. Aty was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer in March 2019. Since then they have travelled to South Africa and cycled in the Laurentians. In the fall and early winter, Aty had been cycling to her palliative care appointments. At the time of their trip to Costa Rica, coronavirus was just a joke to go along with drinking Corona brand beer.

Aty is a retired nurse who worked 18 years at what is now Bluewater Health hospital. Their daughter, Monique currently works in emergency at the same hospital. For the last 14 months advanced lung cancer had been the only medical concern on the minds of the family. On arriving back from the Costa Rica trip they now realized that Aty was very vulnerable to this Covid-19 reality being faced in Canada. They were home a couple of weeks from that trip when Dirk was the first one to have symptoms. An upset stomach, but no fever. Things advanced quickly. The next day he didn't have the energy to stand up on his own. His blood oxygen levels became dangerously low. Finally, Aty called the ambulance and then called her daughter who happened to be on shift at the hospital that day. Their daughter got the emergency team prepared to receive her father. He was assessed and soon it was determined that he needed to be put on a ventilator.

Aty was called for a telephone conference call to be a part of the informed decision. As a nurse, Aty knew that once you are put on a ventilator, the chances of coming off it fine are not good. The eldest son, Robert, who works as a pediatrician in Orillia was then called to Facetime with his father. Dirk and his son quickly reviewed the doctor's recommendations and the restrictions on visiting. He was taking care of business, Robert says, then his father said, "Take care of your mom. I'm not worried about what is on the other side."

Monique watched from outside the room as the intubation was completed. Later the charge nurse would tell her, "your dad simply laid back and said: *let's do this, we got this.*" But the medical team had to pause; for their masks had fogged up from their tears." For that ER department, that day, all of the staff were in shock and tears, COVID had now become real for every one of them. One of their own colleagues loved one's had been hit with the virus.

From that point on the family had to rely on daily news coming from the medical team. A week later, on April 1 a call came from the medical team and at first it seemed like it could be an April Fool's joke- "we are going to take your father off the ventilator and see how it goes. We'll try for a few minutes and then again tomorrow." Those in the family with medical knowledge knew the stakes were high. If Dirk were to require a second intubation the odds were greater for complications. But as the minutes ticked on, all went well and it was determined to leave Dirk off the ventilator for good, breathing on his own. "He will call your mother in 30 minutes when we take the tube out," said the medical lead.

While Dirk had been fighting for his life in intensive care, Aty had developed a fever and a cough. She could no longer utter a full sentence without coughing. The following day, her oxygen levels had dropped very low too. COVID had worn her down. She was taken to hospital as well. It was in those next two days that Dirk adjusted to being discharged from the intensive care unit to the COVID ward. At first he didn't even understand why he was going there. He had not realized he had become victim of the Coronavirus. He was shocked and pleasantly surprised to find that Aty was his roommate on the COVID ward. One week later they were both discharged and able to go home and have Easter dinner back in their own condominium.

In the last month, Monique herself also had the virus, needing to isolate from everyone for 2 weeks and her father-in-law also has had the virus and now is recovered. True to form, Dirk and Aty never wavered from their courage and positivity. They are focused on the practical matters. Aty is back to her chemotherapy treatments keeping terminal cancer at bay, Dirk is working on his physiotherapy, doing

laps around the condo. They are aware of the mounting deaths due to the virus and count themselves blessed. Today, Mother's Day they plan to do a bike ride, even if it is just in the underground parking area of their condo.

About fifty-five years ago, Dirk and Aty met in a church young adult group in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. They say their Christian faith, family, community and the health-care system all came together to carry them through. They believe their blessings were given by God. They credit each other. "We had all the odds against us," Aty said. "I know that together, we can do a lot ... We don't face the future with fear."

I liken Dirk and Aty's words of wisdom to their family to a similar category as Jesus' last words to his disciples. Before he went on the ventilator, Dirk told his loved ones, "you don't need to be worried about what death will bring."

Jesus has just finished a last supper with his disciples. He has washed their feet, given them a new commandment, predicted Peter's denial, foretold Judas's betrayal, and told his friends that he is about to leave them. "Where I am going," he tells them, "you cannot follow just now."

Needless to say, the words sting, and fill the bewildered disciples with fear. What is Jesus talking about? How will they survive if he leaves them? Where will they go? What will happen to their cherished plans? Why is the ground shifting under their feet? Why is everything changing?

If you're like me, sheltering at home, obsessively reading the daily headlines, listening to the rising numbers of infections and fearing what life is going to look like for the next many months or years, you can relate to the disciples' questions. Why is the ground shifting under *our* feet? What's going to happen to our families, our towns, our nations, our world? Will the center hold?

Where is Jesus in all of this pain, fear, death, and loss, and how will we find him if he's gone to a place we "cannot follow now"? It should be no surprise to us, the anxious disciples respond to their predicament by demanding certainty. Thomas asks Jesus for a roadmap: "How can we know the way?" Philip asks for proof: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." What they want — what we *all* want, if we're honest — is the religion of the GPS, the five point plan, the twelve steps, the ten commandments. "Do A, B, and C, and you will definitely arrive at Destination D."

Jesus's response? "Do not let your hearts be troubled." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "If you know me, you will know my Father also." No roadmap. No master plan. No PowerPoint presentation. Just himself. Just the messy, intimate, ever evolving, and often confusing business of relationship. Of trust, patience, and vulnerability.

Dennis Smith lets us overhear the conversation in that Upper Room. Let's imagine it.

It was Passover season, a time to celebrate God's deliverance of Israel from bondage. Jesus and the disciples were so intent on celebrating that they had begun a day early, before the eve of the sabbath beginning. The party was wearing on, the hour was getting late, the wine was still plentiful—but Jesus chose that time to get serious. He knew the pressure was mounting. Jesus was beginning to look ahead to what would come next. "I've got to be going soon," he said. "Well, don't worry," said Peter, "we'll all go with you. It's just about time for the party to end anyway."

"No, what I mean is, I've got to go back where I came from. Later you can follow me there, after I prepare a place for you," said Jesus.... "You don't need a road map," said Jesus, "but you do need to stop and ask directions every now and then to make sure you're pointed in the right direction."

"But Jesus," said Philip, "you know how we hate to stop and ask directions. Why don't you just tell us now how to get there. We can follow your directions."....

Well, "I've been giving you directions all along, in case you didn't notice," said Jesus. "As long as you have been attentive to me and my teachings, you have been pointed toward God."

"Oh," said Judas, as the light dawned in his eyes, "that's what you've been up to all this time." Then he caught himself. "Sure, we knew that. What makes you think we didn't know that? But, Jesus," he continued, "why don't you tell us the way once more, just to make sure we don't get lost."

“Tell you what,” said Jesus, “why don’t I send down a tour guide for you, to help you find the way?” “Good idea!” said the disciples. Then Jesus sighed and looked up to heaven. “God,” he prayed (perhaps with resignation in his voice), “time has just about run out. This is all I have had to work with. I’ve tried my best to get them ready. I just hope they are up to it.”

Perhaps, ‘the way’ isn’t what we thought it was going to be. The way is demanding. The way is precarious. The way takes time. But the invitation of this Gospel is *still* an invitation to confidence. Not because we’re experts at finding God, but because God has always and already found us. With every unknowing we embrace, God finds us one more time.

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,” Jesus tells his sorrowing disciples. Some will find it easiest to think of rooms in a mansion. However, a “dwelling place” is not so much a place, but it means being in the intimate presence of God, or being at the bosom of the Father. Ascended life, means with God, with Jesus, sharing in their intimate bond. Meaning: God is roomy. God is generous. God is hospitable. God can handle your doubts, your fears, and your questions. And God’s offer of belonging extends far beyond the confines of this mortal life. “I go and prepare a place for you,” Jesus says as he stands in the shadow of his own cross. You have a place with me. You have a place with God. Where Jesus is, there we will be (14:3).

This is a Gospel for our time. The story — your story, my story, our collective story of this precarious, overwhelming moment — will not end in death. Though we might feel alone and frightened right now, the Way is open before us. We know it. We know Jesus, and because we know Jesus, we know God. The Way will safely bear us home. Do not let your hearts be troubled. You need not fear the future. Amen.

Acknowledging inspiration from:

He got the virus, And so did she. How couple found way to survive, Toronto Star, May 3, 2020

Thomas, Debie, You Know the Way, Journey with Jesus, webzine for the global church, May 3, 2020

Smith, Dennis E., The Last Discourse, The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Volume 10, Abingdon Press, 1996, p.129-135