

**SERMON- Easter 3A**  
**Charles R. Cowherd**

1 Peter 2:2-10

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

**Good Shepherd (Virtual)**  
**May 7, 2020**

John 14:1-14

**OPENING:**

*“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.”<sup>1</sup>*

*I speak to you in the name of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN*

I love to read, and one of the joys of parenting, I think, is reading to your children. We had our son Mark when I was finishing up Seminary. And so, as we were getting books and reading them to him, I had a brilliant idea to put myself on the map: I would find a secular Children’s story that went with each Sunday in the Church year.

(Now, a secret of preaching is that there are all these aids: not just Biblical commentaries, but a book with a Joke for every Sunday in the church year, a book with a movie reference for every Sunday in the church year and on and on.... )

But I was going to come up with a Children’s Book for each week, *SO Curious George* would be for this Sunday, and *Corduroy* for that Sunday, and on and on.

Before I got too far with my idea, I did a quick Google search and found that, actually.... Someone had beaten me to the punch.

There already were Children’s Books assigned to all 3 years in the Lectionary for every Sunday and every Lesson.<sup>2</sup>

So I cursed the Presbyterians under my breath, and I forgot about my idea until I started looking at our Gospel lesson for this week, which talks about Jesus preparing to leave the disciples, and I remember also the Gospel lesson from two weeks ago, the Emmaus Road story, with Jesus playing a game of Hide and Seek.

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<sup>1</sup> John 14.4-5a (emphasis added.)

<sup>2</sup> See *Story Path: Connecting Children's Literature with our Faith Story*. <http://storypath.upsem.edu/> (Union Presbyterian Seminary) For the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Year A): <http://storypath.upsem.edu/lectionary-links-sunday-may-22-2011/>; <http://storypath.upsem.edu/lectionary-links-sunday-may-18-2014/>; <http://storypath.upsem.edu/lectionary-links-rcl-may-14-2017/>

## **GOSPEL STORY:**

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus is trying to explain what's going to happen: how, now you see him and now you won't; why, he is here today, but will be gone tomorrow.

The disciples don't really appreciate this 'David Copperfield' disappearing act, it's not the future they signed up for. So Jesus has to explain it again, over and over, and John does not spare us any of that repetition. In fact, that repetition reminds me of the dialogue between a parent and child where children need that repetition and reassurance in order to start to get it.

The message that Jesus is delivering—"I'm going" and "You are not (exactly) coming with me"—is indeed heartbreaking when seen from the perspective of the loyal disciples, or the perspective of a child.

## **LLAMA LLAMA**

It made me think of a few children's books, but one in particular:

*Llama Llama Red Pajama.*

Written and illustrated in 2005 by Anna Dewdney, it's a story of a Llama who is put to bed by his Mama but then starts to get worried about where his Mama is.

I will read a little bit:

*Llama, Llama red pajama*

*In the dark without his mama*

*Eyes wide open covers drawn*

*What if mama Llamas gone?*

*Llama, Llama red pajama*

*Weeping wailing for his mama*

*Will his mama ever come*

*Mama run run run!*

*Baby Llama what a tizzy*

*Sometimes mama is very busy*

*Please stop all this llama drama*

*And be patient for your mama*

*Little Llama don't you know  
Mama Llama loves you so  
Mama Llama's always near,  
Even if she's not right here.*<sup>3</sup>

**“Mama Llama’s always near, Even if she’s not right here.”**

Regardless of what age you are, this fear that if something leaves our sight, that we will lose it forever, is with us.

Who among us has not felt, at the departure of a loved one, that question of: “will this be the last time I see them?”

Or, who among us has not felt, at this specific time, this nagging/ irrational/ illogical/ immature feeling that our Church, either the people or the building itself, might all be gone when this is over?

(Living next to the church, I see parishioners drive through sometimes, and I know maybe you are telling yourself “it’s just to get out of the house”, but I also think it’s a little bit just to check and see if it’s still there.)

## **PRESENCE & ABSENCE**

I like how the book depicts this idea of presence and absence, that is a deep part of life, and a deep part of our faith.

Reading it, although we sympathize with the Baby Llama who causes a tizzy, we recognize the child’s concerns as irrational and illogical. We tend to identify with the parent primarily.

But I think we actually should see this story from the viewpoint of the Baby Llama, just as we should read our Gospel story from the viewpoint of the disciples. Thomas and Phillip flail wildly with their questions. These are supposed to be the Eagle Scouts, the rock stars who are going to lead the Church, but instead they are revealed to be as scared as small children.

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Dewdney. 2005. *Llama Llama Red Pajama*. New York: Viking.

Their first inclination is that, since Jesus is leaving, that they are on their own, that they will need a map or a GPS tracker to find Jesus.

They want the secret directions, the purest doctrine, and they certainly want the keys to the kingdom.

But all of that presupposes that Jesus is waiting somewhere with his arms crossed, trying to make sure that we are good enough to join him, and if we made the cut. The disciples assume that they will have to do something in order to get there.

Instead Jesus says “I will come again and will take you to myself.”<sup>4</sup>

The answer/ the secret/ the mystery/ to that question “where are you going?” is not a doctrine, or some deep secret, or membership in a group.

It’s not about geography, it’s about a relationship.

It’s a person.

It’s a voice.

It’s Jesus’ face, staring at you.

It’s God’s embrace over the meal.

It’s the reassurance in the dark.<sup>5</sup>

## **CONCLUSION:**

The most amazing thing about God’s love for us is that we don’t need to search and find it, but rather that it will come to us.

This is Good News because the usual mechanism for helping us with that, the Church, looks very different right now. But it reminds us that the Holy Spirit can work wonders, defying all structures and arrangements in front of it.

This is Good News because it shows us that we cannot do it by ourselves, we can only do it with God, and with each other. We are sheep that need the Shepherd, children who need their parent, sinners and Saints who need the Risen Lord.

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<sup>4</sup> John 14.3

<sup>5</sup> Buechner, Frederick. 2006. “Let Jesus Show” in *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 270-1.

I know that when a lot of us hear the Gospel passage we cannot help but hear it as: “In my father’s house there are many *mansions*” from the King James Version.

And we have this vision of Heaven where we all get our own mansion, which sounds good right now with us cramped into our houses for the last few months and into the foreseeable future.

Instead, Jesus says “You already know what it looks like, it’s ME, I am the way and the truth and life, I will come to you, I am already dwelling in you and you will hear my voice and you will see my face in your own homes, and in your own lives and in each other.”

OR, in other words: “Jesus is always near, even he is not right here.”

**AMEN**