

“Don’t Let Your Hearts Be Troubled” – John 14:1-14 – May 14, 2017
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Like some of you, I am a fan of some of the popular books, movies, and television series that portray a bleak future and focus on one or a few people who are attempting to survive in the face of upheaval. Even if you haven’t seen them or read them, you’ve probably heard about *The Walking Dead* that features life after a zombie apocalypse, where individuals or bands of people fight over dwindling resources and try to stay safe from the ravenous zombies or *The Hunger Games* that portrays a disturbing look at life in what’s left of the USA post-apocalypse, in a brutal attempt to keep the 12 Districts in line, young people are chosen to fight to the death in an annual contest that is a spectacle for the elite. Even if these are unfamiliar to you, you might remember the books *1984* and *Brave New World*.

I was curious as to why these stories seem to be so popular at this point in time, so I Googled it. I was mildly surprised by the number of articles and blogs that were asking that same question – why are we fascinated with dystopian stories, or stories about life after the apocalypse. Here are some of the answers: The stories help young people handle their angst <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/06/14/fresh-hell-2>

They help to deal with an ever-changing world and the unknown future, with an inner fear that some of this is actually real <http://blog.dailyfreepress.com/2014/09/29/obsessed-dystopian-movies/>

Represent real-world issues and provide a way of dealing with them <https://the-artifice.com/popularity-of-dystopian-literature/>

They explore the archetypal fear that everything has shattered, so now what? <http://time.com/32022/divergent-dystopian-stories-shailene-woodley-interview/>

They illustrate the mistrust of authority but a deep-seated hope for survival <https://moviepilot.com/p/why-are-we-so-obsessed-with-ya-dystopias/1217703>

I think it is safe to say that we live in a time of uncertainty, a time when we feel like we are being bombarded on all sides by negativity. We see instability in our government, we see devastation and famine in places around the world, we worry about how climate change will impact our future and the lives of our children. Our instinctual reaction is fight or flight. We respond to upheaval in any number of ways, one of which seems to be our fascination with these dystopian stores. We can live vicariously through the hero of the story, who manages to fight back despite the odds. Like other forms of escapism, they help us deal with living in a world where it seems like we have little control.

So as I have been thinking of these things this week, I did so with our passage from John’s gospel in mind. Chapter 14 of John begins a long section in the gospel, two whole chapters, where Jesus is preparing his disciples for the time in the not so distant future when he will no longer be with them. Jesus has just shared a final meal with them, and he begins to teach them. He knows that the situation in Jerusalem is about to get very tense – his arrest is just a few hours away. And so he is anticipating how the disciples will react. He knows that they will experience a great deal of fear, anxiety, and sadness. Perhaps even some feelings of abandonment, confusion, and loneliness. In just a few hours, their world is going to be turned upside down.

So he says to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Don’t get caught up in the drama. Don’t be ruled by fear. Now, he’s not trying to minimize the struggle that they are about to face. He certainly knows how real it will be. But Jesus offers to them these words of comfort as he prepares them for his departure. Things are going to get rough, but don’t worry. Don’t let your hearts be troubled.

Jesus explains to his disciples that he is leaving but that's not the end. When he's gone, he will prepare a place for them. That one day he will be back to receive them. These words are often very comforting at funerals. And for the disciples he is giving them hope for the future – both immediate future and long term. No matter how bad it might get, and it will get bad for those who follow him, the promise is that he will be there for them.

But here's the problem. The disciples aren't really hearing all that Jesus is saying because they're stuck on one thing - the fact that he's leaving them. This makes no sense to them. They can't imagine how it will be without him. How could he possibly think about leaving them at this time? There still is so much left to do. He's supposed to be the Messiah. He's supposed to bring about change and reform. How can he do that if he's gone? So as they try to wrap their minds around this idea of him being gone, they are not listening to anything else he's trying to say. And they interrupt, by questioning him.

Thomas voices his fears – we don't even know where you are going, so how could we possibly know the way? Then Philip speaks up – Just show us the Father, and we'll be satisfied. Under all this, I can almost read their racing thoughts – don't leave us. How will we make it in this world, now that we've known you? How can we be content with the world as it is, when you have shown us something different, something greater? We long for your kingdom. We need you to help us and guide us. I know that sometimes we experience these very same feelings in our lives as we long for an end to violence and hunger, and we hope for a world where everyone gets a fair share.

Jesus responds to their fears – Thomas, I am the way. Philip, whoever has seen me has seen the Father. It will be alright. Follow me, trust me. Do what I've shown you. And do not let your hearts be troubled. You will be fine.

There's a commercial for Quaker Oats that's been on TV recently that uses an image of a young boy learning how to ride a bike. Let's unpack that image a bit, minus the oatmeal. Picture this - for weeks, the little boy has been using training wheels, up and down the sidewalk, back and forth in front of the house, his mother coaching and encouraging him each day. He is always confident that he'll be okay, because the training wheels are holding him up and his mother is watching.

But finally the day comes when his mother takes off the training wheels. Now he's afraid to ride. So she holds onto the bike, and jogs along behind him as he peddles. He keeps glancing over his shoulder – don't let go! You can do this, she says. You know how to do it. But he's frightened. What if a dog runs in front of me? What if I start to tip over? What if a strong wind comes? What if someone's ball gets thrown in my way? What if a bird flies in my face? He's stalling because he is afraid to ride without the support. He doesn't trust that he can do it alone.

It's true, his mother says. You might get wobbly; you might go the wrong way and get stuck in some grass. You might even fall down. But you know what? If you do fall down, I will come get you. I will pick you up and hug you tight. I will clean your wound and put a big ol' band-aid on it. And if you cry, I will dry your tears. You'll be fine. You can do it.

For the disciples, their world is changing very quickly. They're moving into a scary time. A time when their teacher and lord will be gone. They will have enemies and they will risk getting ridiculed or imprisoned for their beliefs. They will be in the minority and will experience oppression. But Jesus gives them these words as encouragement – you're not sure what to do? Do what I do – I am the Way. You want to know what God is like? Look at me, hear me – I speak only the Father's words.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

The disciples believed Jesus. They trusted him. Had they let fear take over after Jesus was gone, we would not be here today. There would be no church. Instead, when things got rough, they held onto the promise. They believed in God. Their world did indeed turn upside down, and things got a messy. Sure, they faltered a bit along the way – the ride got a little wobbly. But they had one another and they put their hope in Christ's promise. And the church carried on.

Life is full of change. What happens today may be different tomorrow. We can't look backward – we must move on. Many times the situations we experience are beyond our control. An event occurs, reality around us changes. And the question is, what's next? Will we hide or will we confront it with Christ, at our back. Fight or flight? If life were a dystopian TV show, will we get eaten by the zombies or will we fight to somehow survive?