

“Let those who seek the Lord give praise!  
May your hearts live forever!” AMEN!

The couple drove home from  
the parent teacher conference.

They were silent because the conference  
had not gone well.

Their teenage son’s grades were slipping  
and they were thinking about how to inspire him  
to try harder and be  
more focused on school.

Finally, the husband broke the silence.

“Let’s think of it this way,” he said.  
“At least we know our son’s not  
cheating on his exams, right?!” :-)

That’s a hopeful way to look at it.

We do well when we find hopeful ways  
to look at the world today because it is  
so easy to become despaired.

In fact, our DNA is wired to keep us

on guard and remain distrustful about  
trying new things.

The brain stem urges us to be selfish  
in order to protect ourselves and  
our egos tell us take care of number 1.

For no other reason but  
so that you live longer.

Still, more and more, people are  
finding awareness of these voices inside us  
and concluding that they are in fact lies  
that we tell ourselves.

Studies show that people who are hopeful,  
live significantly longer than those  
who distrust or excessively worry.

Hopeful people are happier and live longer  
and more peace-filled lives.

Hopeful people are more likely to be part  
of a community and partner in the  
benefits of belonging to a community;

being a part of something bigger than ourselves  
gives us the opportunity to stay positive,  
to see the best in the world and

work to spread ripples of  
goodness around us.

A hopeful person finds the positive in the negative  
and the despairing person can only see  
the negative in the positive. (Pause)

A story to explain, there once was an  
avid duck hunter who was looking  
for a new bird dog.

The search ended when he was able to find one  
that could actually walk on water!

The hunter was shocked and knew  
he had something so special that  
his friends would never believe it if  
he told them.

He decided to let them see  
the dog in action for themselves.

One particular friend was quite pessimistic  
by nature so this was the first one  
the man invited to go hunting.

On hunting day they were perched  
by the water waiting when a flock of ducks  
flew overhead.

They fired and a duck fell to the water and  
just as expect the dog  
jumped into action.

He hit the water and ran right on top of it  
to retrieve the duck.

The dog with duck in mouth returned  
with only wet paws.

The same continued all day and  
the pessimistic friend did not say word.

On the way home the hunter asked his friend  
if he had noticed anything unusual  
about his new dog?

“I sure did!” The pessimist replied.

“I noticed your new dog doesn’t  
even know how to swim!” :-)

Our gospel today, can at first,  
give us a feeling of despair,  
but when we come to this text  
with hopeful eyes we can find there is  
really plenty of positive and  
hopeful information.

The first clue is to recognize that it falls  
under Jesus' commitment to love.

And that if the disciples truly love Jesus,  
they would rejoice knowing that he is going  
to the Father.

And that no matter what happens to him,  
no matter what the world throws at Jesus,  
He remains the first and the last. (Pause)

Firsts and lasts have significant meanings  
to people in their lives.

A first kiss, a first love, the first time  
you get paid for work are moments  
often embedded into our memories.

The last time we do or say something is  
equally significant and memorable.

The last vacation, the last time you  
hugged or physically touch a loved one,  
the last time you'd had a drink,  
if you're an alcoholic, are moments  
that are never to be forgotten.

The lasts and the firsts take on

this role of importance in the Bible, too.

So, on this 5th Sunday of Easter we find  
Jesus doing some “last things.”

The section we read today is what scholars call  
Jesus’ final discourse.

This section is part of his last words  
spoken to his disciples where Jesus  
told them how He must be leaving and  
being their pastor (the Good Shepherd)

He is, He prepared them for the event  
by encouraging them.

Leaving them with directions to continue  
the work He had begun and  
to elevate them, “friends.”

In this final discourse Jesus reminded them  
to stay connected with one another and  
to love one another.

And we, as followers of Jesus  
removed by generations since Jesus  
first said these “last words,”

hear the emotion and can even understand  
that all the disciples could hear that day

was the “good-bye.”

How could they take in any of  
the other positive information from Jesus?

How would they be able to hold onto  
Jesus’ promises when all they can hear  
is his good-bye?

How do we NOT let our hearts be troubled  
when we lose someone? (Pause)

You see?

It is quite easy to slip into the hopelessness  
that the disciples surely felt.

Yet, we find that what was most important  
Jesus taught with visual aids.

This one being the vine.

When Jesus said, “I am the true vine,”  
we find that he did another  
significant “last time” marker.

In John, Jesus had already used phrases like,  
“I am the Light,”  
“I am the resurrection and the life,”

“I am the Good Shepherd.”

And now today,  
we hear his last one,  
“I am the true vine.”

After this Jesus will only refer to himself as “I am.”

A phrase that identifies Himself as God,  
but for today’s reading,  
He was the true vine.

Today, Jesus is the true vine,  
God is the vine-grower and the disciples are  
the branches that grow from the vine. (Pause)

Believers and followers of Jesus,  
you too are the branches that grow from  
the true vine.

When you tell the story of Jesus or  
guide others to come to fathom God’s love  
for them you bear much fruit.

Ordinary people are able  
to do extraordinary things. (Pause)

So, in order to remain hopeful, optimistic,  
and connected to Jesus’ vine

we look to the example given to us in  
the reading from Acts today.

In this extraordinary event we find Philip  
and the Ethiopian Eunuch doing  
extra-ordinary things.

The unconventional encounter with a person  
that did not fit the notions of gender in  
the Roman world radically reminds us  
of God's inclusivity.

This person was neither male nor female,  
sexually impotent and likely scorned by  
the Roman construct of masculinity and virility.

Yet, the message from the Book of Acts describes  
this person as powerful, an official of  
the queen's treasury and wealthy enough  
to be reading a scroll of Isaiah.

We wonder if Philip had any reservations  
because it is easier to believe  
God loves everyone, welcomes everyone  
and pursues everyone than it is  
to say the words of welcome  
and even harder still  
to do the actions of  
inclusivity. (Pause)

That is our teaching point this morning.

The three points of hope are  
to believe, say, and then do.

We believe Jesus to be the true vine,  
we speak the words of his message of love  
and His connection to God,  
then do the actions that bear fruit  
because we are the branches and  
the branches can be extra-  
ordinary. (Pause)

We do not need to get lost or despair  
that the non-abiding branches wither and  
are thrown into the fire.

This is not a moment of Jesus' judgment  
upon his disciples or upon us.  
It is the truth of the judgment we put on ourselves.

We know when we've done actions or  
said words that do not abide with Christ  
and we send judgment on ourselves  
while the regret burns within.

So hear this and be released  
from the fire of regret, come to know  
the fullness of God's love.

We never quite know what God is up to  
but we always remember the actions of  
Jesus Christ and move to never  
duplicate bigotry or gawk at  
a person's distinctiveness.

The foreign world is beloved by God, too.

Is that too astounding to believe?

The foreign world is beloved by God.

Look, there is some water,  
what is there to prevent that one  
from being Baptized?

What would you say? What would you do?

AMEN!