

# Story and Meditation: Ask Me for Anything

May 10, 2020

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Mother's Day

John 14:1-14

by *Eric Anderson*

He had been to the amusement park, so he knew how to drive a car.

He was young. Maybe about six or seven. And he'd been to the amusement park where they had the cars you could drive yourself. Mom had sat with him and she'd said very good things about his driving. He hadn't run off the road. He hadn't gotten stuck in a ditch. He'd only bumped the car ahead of him a little bit, and that was just because it was being driven by his only sister and he was joking.

Besides, the car his cousin was driving behind them bumped them even harder, so... He knew how to drive.

When the day was over and everybody was tired out, they returned to their car in the gigantic parking lot. "I'm really tired," said mother.

"Oh!" he said. "If you're tired, I'll be glad to drive. I know how!"

Everybody – sister, cousin, everybody – looked at him.

"When did you learn to drive?" sister asked.

"Just now!" he said. "In the park!"

"Step over here," said mother. She opened the door where she usually sat, the one with the steering wheel. She pointed at the two pedals on the floor. "What do those do?"

Well, that was a puzzle. The car he'd driven in the amusement park had had only one pedal. You pressed it down to go and when you lifted your foot off it, the car stopped. "Well, that one must make it go and stop," he said, pointing at the big wide one on the left. "That one must be for... putting the windows down?"

"I'm afraid not," said his mother. "Now look at this."

She took him to the front of the car and she stared at the bumper. "What was the bumper like on the car you drove?" she said.

“It was big and had these big springs,” he told her.

“What does this one look like?”

“Um. Plastic?”

She pointed at the ground. “Is there anything missing from what you drove?”

Well, yes, there was. His car had followed a track with a guide under the car to keep it going the right way. His mouth made a big round “O” of realization.

“These cars aren’t much alike, are they, Mom?” he said.

“Not very much, no,” she answered. “So though I thank you for making the offer to drive, I think it’s probably best if I do it.”

Everybody agreed.

In nine or ten years, I hope you’ll hold that mother and son in your prayers as he learns how to drive for real.

The words of Jesus we heard just now come from the Last Supper. I know it’s after Easter, but let’s face it: If we were to limit our Gospel readings to things that happened after the resurrection in this season, we’d be out of material pretty quickly.

No, these words are part of what gets called “Jesus’ Farewell Speech to his Disciples.” He speaks of his impending arrest and crucifixion, he speaks of his resurrection, and frequently in terms that, as John tells the story, his friends don’t really understand. Both Thomas and Philip ask questions here that, all in all, Jesus seems to feel they should know the answers to already.

This is a passage filled with extraordinary statements: Jesus’ assertion that he has the ability to create homes in the realm of God. Jesus’ assertion that he is in God and God is in him. Jesus declaration that he will do anything we ask in his name.

Anything?

We’ll have seven-year-olds driving cars in no time.

Except that we know perfectly well that not all our prayers get fulfilled as we hope or expect.

Saint Augustine wrote in his Tractates that a Savior cannot give people everything they want because not everything supports their salvation. A Savior that accommodates the damnation of people is not a Savior at all. He was aware, however, that other prayers have also not been fulfilled. He wrote, “There are some things, indeed, which, although really asked in His name,

that is, in harmony with His character as both Saviour and Master, He doeth not at the time we ask them, and yet He faileth not to do them. For when we pray that the kingdom of God may come, it does not imply that He is not doing what we ask, because we do not begin at once to reign with Him in the everlasting kingdom: for what we ask is delayed, but not denied. Nevertheless, let us not fail in praying, for in so doing we are as those that sow the seed; and in due season we shall reap.”

Yet what about the delay in many other prayers that are in harmony with Christ’s character as Savior and Monarch? What about the prayers of people being assaulted, what about the prayers of people in their illnesses, what about the prayers of the persecuted and the forgotten? What about the prayers of the world in a pandemic? Is it enough to say that in our prayers “We are as those that sow the seed; and in due season we shall reap”?

As Lindsey Jodrey writes at Working Preacher, “I cannot pretend to understand where God is in the midst of a global crisis. We preachers often share words of affirmation and assurance from a place of strength. We stand behind sturdy pulpits and lecterns, in our Sunday best—well-fed, (sometimes) well-rested, and we project a sense of control as we offer a semblance of comfort, of security.”

I can’t pretend to understand it either, even as I stand here projecting a sense of control.

Interestingly enough, neither could... John. The author of this very gospel.

Of the four Gospel writers, John is the only one to make the claim that the book is based on the recollections of an eyewitness to Jesus’ life and ministry. It’s a specific eyewitness, and one of the frustrations of reading John’s gospel is that we don’t even get this person’s name. He’s simply identified as “the disciple Jesus loved.” In chapter 21, though, we learn that the community where this person lived out his life came to believe the he would live until Jesus returned. “So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die,” John wrote. “Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die.”

John appears to have added chapter 21, because the closing words of chapter 20 - “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” - are a good, solid ending for a book. But when the “beloved disciple” died, upon whose memory and leadership the community had relied, that ending was not good enough. Something more had to be said to explain why the prayers of that church had gone... unanswered.

Or perhaps better, to acknowledge the real tension between these extraordinary promises and the ongoing struggles of Jesus’ followers. The church had been periodically persecuted, had engaged in conflicts within its leadership, had seen its first generation of role models perish. Its members had suffered the “ordinary” sorrows of first century life, one in which most people were desperately poor, worked hard, and died young. The Jesus movement was supposed to

overturn all that. Jesus himself was supposed to overturn all that. Things stayed much the same.

Comedian Gilda Radner wrote near the end of her 1989 memoir *It's Always Something*, "I wanted a perfect ending, so I sat down to write the book with the ending in place before there even was an ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end."

You might remember that she died about the time the book reached shelves.

No, some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end. John knew that. All that first generation of Christians came to know that. We know that.

Elisabeth Johnson writes at *Working Preacher*, "Jesus promises to be with us through the power of the Spirit, to work in and through us to accomplish his purposes in the world. This does not necessarily happen in easily visible, spectacular ways. Yet wherever there is healing, reconciling, life-giving work happening, this is the work of God. Wherever there is life in abundance, this is Jesus' presence in our midst."

In days of a pandemic, when I desperately want a magic wand to make it all better and make it all go away, I don't find that a satisfactory interpretation of "I will do whatever you ask in my name." Satisfaction, however, does not seem to be on the menu. This is what I have.

This becomes a situation in which hope and faith must lead us, because certainty and satisfaction cannot. Some poems do not rhyme. Some stories do not have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is that way.

But life also brings support for our faith and sometimes even fulfillment for our hopes. The faith that disciple inspired in John's community was deep enough to survive when he had passed away. There are hospitals today playing joyful songs every time a coronavirus patient is released to go home. In the midst of all the grief and danger, people are caring for one another, supporting one another, loving one another. In the midst of all the risk and the struggle, people are wearing masks, limiting their contact, and many are paying a price for that.

Hope and faith, love and care, wisdom and compassion. These will help us endure.

"Ask me for those," Jesus might say, and go on to tell us: "Look around you. You've already received them."

Amen.