

**Fifth Sunday of Easter (A)**

**May 14, 2017**

**Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7**

**1 Peter 2:4-9**

**John 14:1-12**

**A young black man from Chicago found himself playing baseball with a farm team in Kanawha County, West Virginia. The police learned that two women had been robbed and sexually assaulted. All the black baseball players were questioned and some finger printed including Jimmie C. Gardner who was 23 years old at the time. Even though he declared his innocence, this young man was convicted of the crime and sentenced to a 110-year-sentence in the West Virginia Prison system. The injustice did not occur as a result of some mistaken identity or even incompetence. Rather it was the result of false testimony by a state police forensic scientist who manipulated the evidence.**

**"I went through periods of having anger," Gardner said. "But I had to channel that anger. I had high blood pressure, so I had to find a way to stay calm. I had to breath differently. I had to maintain my health, stay humble and positive. And give praise to God. Or else I'd probably die in prison."**

**Even though the false testimony of the forensic scientist was known within the first three years of incarceration, Jimmie C. Gardner would spend 26 years in prison. In 2013, U.S. District Judge Joseph Goodwin noticed the inconsistencies in the case and overturned the conviction and vacated the sentence. Spending decades in prison for a crime he did not commit, Jimmie C. Gardner came out smiling to the embrace of his family and loved ones.**

**The truth can be elusive and difficult to identify. On the other hand, we might know the truth but choose not to fully embrace it. And then, we might be deeply convinced what the truth is, but people and forces surrounding us might work against that truth. Within this gospel lesson today lies the fundamental accountability for all who carry the name "Christian." Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." The question before us today is to what extent do I believe what Jesus is saying. Working with an individual or group in therapy, I find that we sometimes stumble upon a belief or truth. I ask the individual or individuals I am working with, "To what extent do you believe that? At this moment do you believe that 10%, 50%, or 90%? I would like to say that we are always moving toward the truth, we are always moving toward greater understanding.**

**We who carry the name Christian have a unique experience and that experience is the life of Christ. We are called to take that life and to incorporate it somehow into the way we live our lives. We sense in the reading from 1 Peter a key issue that Jesus has come to share with us...the keystone, the cornerstone, the most important piece of information we need. This is Jesus' teaching, his way of life. We need to embrace the way Jesus lived and taught his life. Jesus uses the image of rock in two ways. First, he says the cornerstone is a rock that is the most stable thing we can hold on to. Second, if we do not accept the cornerstone, if we don't understand it, this stone becomes a stumbling block and keeps us from where we are called to be, keeps us from living the fulness of life.**

**In the gospel lesson, Jesus about to leave his disciples, is aware that they do not understand the powerful, simple way of life he has been teaching them. Jesus is**

nervous and so are the disciples. There is great danger ahead and Jesus looks at them and says, "Don't be anxious. Don't be so worried. Don't let your hearts be troubled." Here we find one of the most important aspects of Jesus' teaching: We are not supposed to be torn apart by anxiety and worry. We have to trust in more than ourselves, in more than our human natures, in more than the perfection we long to see in others. We must trust in the extraordinary promise of God that he is going *to use everything* and *to work everything*, *to bring* us to the place called the truth, the life.

What we must struggle to understand and move toward is something in the great action of Jesus dying, rising, and returning that is at the heart of the whole Christian message. Nothing is more essential in the message of Jesus than the Paschal Mystery... submission and surrender to what is. We get this very strange and mysterious invitation on the part of Jesus to recognize the tension and the problems, the sin and conflict, the moments of injustice and disappointment. All of these things are essential parts of the process. When we submit and work with these very real and difficult life experiences, it does not mean that we have been overpowered by them or not done anything to change them.

Jimmie C. Gardner did not languish in prison because of one's person deception, or many others who failed to listen to his plea. He did not permit himself to become a bitter and angry individual. He remained committed to the truth, worked toward the truth, until the transformation finally unfolded.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life." The way that we look out at the world, the way that we look at our very selves, the way that we look at the difficult events that unfold in our lives, is all about the way we look at Jesus. Somehow, we submit to the whole messy, sometimes ugly, process called human beings struggling to live out the gospel. Jesus is the keystone that identifies our lives, day in and day out.

Challenged by the word, nourished by the Eucharist, we begin another new week. There may well be an anxious moment or two, but let us remember, Jesus journeys with us. "It is well, it is well, with my soul!"