

May 7, Easter 5a (John 14:1-14)

Jesus is the dam that holds us when the levee breaks.

by [Jared E. Alcántara](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

Have you ever been in a situation where your heart was so stirred up, so unsettled, so confused that you didn't know what you would do or where you would turn? Jesus' disciples feel this way. In a time of doubt and uncertainty, Jesus speaks words of comfort to them: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." The word for "troubled" means "stir up, unsettle, throw into confusion." To put it another way, *Do not let your hearts be stirred up, unsettled, thrown into confusion. Trust in God. Trust also in me.*

I live two and a half hours from San Antonio. Between 1845 and 1921, seven catastrophic floods hit that city. The floods caused major damage to downtown buildings and killed many people. In 1921 alone, 50 people were killed.

Something had to be done to remedy the problem, so over a 12-year period (1929-1941) city architects built a series of canals and dams to manage the flow of the San Antonio River to prevent it from rising so high and flooding the community. It was a major architectural marvel for its time.

Now, fast-forward about 50 years. In the 1990s, city planners realized that the dams and canals could no longer protect a city that had quickly grown. Something had to be done. Otherwise, the system would fail in the event of a historic flood—or even just an above-average flood. So they built two major tunnels with a price tag of \$111 million, a financial investment that many city leaders did not support.

Sure enough, just ten months after completing the project, in October 1998, a 500-year flood hit San Antonio. Over 16 inches of rain fell in the span of a few days. Yet, when the city planners made their way to the riverwalk downtown, they saw tourists sitting in outdoor cafés, people walking their dogs, and couples meandering the streets holding hands. What happened? The tunnels worked. They paid for

themselves ten times over. Again, in 2002, San Antonio had 16 inches of rain in just a few days, and again the tunnels held.

In times of quiet desperation, Jesus says to us what he says to his disciples: *I will be the dam that holds you when the levee breaks, the tunnel that brings you through to the other side when you're stirred up, unsettled, thrown into confusion. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me.*

The disciples need to hear this. Jesus has just told them he will be with them “only a little longer.” Now he tells them he’s leaving. He will come back to get them but has to leave them first. They don’t need to worry, though. They already know the way.

Thomas asks the same question that is likely on the other disciples’ minds. “If we don’t know where you’re going, how will we know the way?”

Jesus’ answer has often been used as a religious litmus test, at least in North America. The way, truth, and life. To get to the Father, you’ve got to go through Jesus, like he’s some kind of bouncer standing by to vet our access to the triune God. In or out, pass or fail.

This seems like a strange thing to say right after telling followers not to let their hearts be troubled. Don’t get me wrong: Jesus makes exclusive claims, and he has hard teachings. Even these words have an edge to them. But the first task is to discern what Jesus is saying to those who believe him in his context—before making conclusions about what he is saying to those who do not believe him in ours.

What if Jesus wants to reframe Thomas’s questions from “where” and “how” questions to “who” questions? It would not be the first time that he answered a question someone wasn’t asking. It would make more sense after telling his followers not to let their hearts be troubled. So, you want to know the way? You have a person. So, you want to know the how? You have a person.

Do you know anyone who has no desire whatsoever to find a path, to learn the truth, or to experience life? Now consider the possibility that all three—the path, the truth, the life—can be found in a person. That is what Jesus is saying here, and it is good news.

When the rains come, when the waters rise, our temptation is to look for answers to our “where” and “how” questions. In those moments—in all moments—there is one who stands before us, one in whom and through whom is the way, the truth, and the

life. When we do not know the way, he will transform our questions into better ones. When our hearts are stirred up, he will hold us through the storm.