

QUO VADIS?
September 25, 2016 –John 14: 1-6
The Church of the Covenant

Most roads are notable for the fact that they have one of two directions –this way or the opposite way. That is, with the exception of downtown Pittsburgh –where they all seem to be ONE way...the opposite way you need to go. “*QUO VADIS?*” is the question in the Latin meaning “which way?” Which way are you going on the road? Are you going *toward* something or are you going *away* from something? Quo Vadis? Which way?

It factors prominently in a story, perhaps apocryphal, that is set along the Appian Way outside of Rome, about 30 AD. Great persecutions are underway against the church in Rome. The Emperor Nero is viciously persecuting the early church, blaming it for the fire he himself set in order to build his golden palace. It is said he crucified the saints and covered them with tar on their crosses and used them to light his garden parties. I suspect the Emperor is toasting on a spit in hell right now. But the persecutions are fierce. The pain is great. The trouble tangible. And into this setting is set this story of the Apostle Peter on the Apian Way outside of Rome. For Peter is fleeing from persecution and almost certain death. He is the Bishop of Rome, the head of the church there, but evidently when the going gets tough, the less-than-tough get going. The Romans had an engineering system the marvel of the ancient world and not to be rivaled until our modern day. This road system spread out throughout the Empire and was a major cause of the spread of Christianity across the face of the then known world. But on this particular day, Peter is fleeing away from his church, away from his pain, away from all that is facing him back in Rome. And into this story of the early church, suddenly and without explanation a stranger appears to him on the road. They engage in conversation about the events in Rome. The stranger speaks of the cross of Jesus and then looks Peter directly in the eyes and asks the question: “Quo vadis?” Which way are you going, Peter? Which direction are you headed? Of course the stranger is Jesus. And of course then Peter realizes what he is doing. And then of course Peter turns and goes back the opposite direction, to embrace his fate. Quo vadis?

Our scripture is interesting. It is the familiar verse of Jesus from the Gospel of John. The Apostle Thomas, sometimes referred to as “Doubting Thomas” has just said to Jesus, “We do not know the way.” And Jesus responds in the familiar answer: “*I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.*” (John 15: 6) But did you know that the word translated “way” as in “I am the way” actually can also mean, “the road” or “the path”? So Thomas is saying, “I do not know the way, nor the road to God, nor the path to God”. And Jesus replies: “I am the way...I am the road...I am the path...” And no one gets to the Father, to God, but by me...and my way, and my road, and my path. Indeed, the earliest expression and name for the early church was “The Way”. As in, Christianity is The WAY to God. So I suppose the first question is: Are we walking in the WAY? Are we following Jesus or something else along the path? Have we chosen to follow Him and Him alone? Is HE our Way? Or is HE not our way? Jesus claims exclusivity and we moderns chafe at that. Is Jesus indeed the path on which you walk today? Is it Christ alone, or something less? Quo vadis?

But of course Peter was walking on the path, stepping along the stones of the Appian Way, he had long ago committed his life to follow Jesus. He had been with Jesus by the empty tomb. He had preached the sermon filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But the issue with Peter wasn't that he wasn't on the path. No, the issue with Peter was that he was headed in the wrong direction on the path. He was headed away from where Jesus wanted him to be. He was not of the WAY. He was going the opposite direction. He was running away from God; he was not running into the embrace of God. And if I may say I think there is the simplest of all spiritual formulations that we may ask ourselves as Christians; it is so simple we may miss it but most profound spiritual truth is indeed simple. See, the second question we need to ask ourselves is this: Are we running TOWARD God in our life or are we running AWAY from God in our life? Have we made choices that take us far away from the

love and embrace of the Holy? Or have we set our face to go to Rome regardless of the cost? Which way, are you headed today, O Christian? Which way on the path? Quo vadis?

Think of it this way. Something happens to us in our lives. Something bad intervenes. We are skipping down the garden path largely happy and content, coming to church, worshipping God, seeking to love Jesus. But something happens. There is a death of a loved one. There is bad news from the doctor. Someone we care about is in decline or in pain. The church doesn't do what we want the church to do. We pray but we don't get the answer to prayer we want. We become disappointed. Frustrated. Turned off. This God stuff doesn't work. The pain is too great. We do not want to go THIS direction, we want to go THAT direction. We act out. Our heart is in pain. We become critical of everything and everyone. We find ourselves running along a pathway that is in the opposite direction to where the Almighty wishes us to be. Beloved we are either running toward God or away from God. We may be on the path but now the question is which direction are we headed. Which way asks Jesus? Quo vadis?

Doubting Thomas asks to see Jesus' wounds in order to confirm that HE is indeed the Christ, that He is indeed the One who went to the cross and suffered and died for him. Jesus is always known through His wounds, through His wounded-ness, through His cross. We know Jesus through the CROSS. And may I say, we know Him better and deeper and in a more profound way, through our crosses, through our wounds, through the great heart-pains of life. Through HIS cross we know Him better. Through our cross we know Him better.

But we can endeavor to flee from that cross. Just as the Apostle Peter sought to flee from the cross he was facing in Rome. Just like Peter sought to run away from God. Peter ran away from the embrace of Jesus and not into His waiting arms. It is why we must then ask ourselves the question: Which way am I headed on THE WAY? Am I headed TO God? Am I headed AWAY FROM Jesus? Quo vadis?

William Barclay in his little but important book, The Twelve Christ Chose, notes the way each of the disciples died, according to legend. Again, perhaps apocryphal, but Barclay notes that all of the disciples, save John the beloved disciple, were martyred in some way for their faith. Barclay notes that the Apostle Peter was martyred in Rome. Peter was crucified and crucified upside down, because he felt he was not worthy to be crucified in the same way as was his Lord and Savior whom he loved. Allow me now, please, a preacher-ly flight of fancy. Allow me to speculate on how this all occurred. Peter is confronted along the Appian Way by Jesus and is asked, Quo Vadis? And he comes to himself and turns himself around and heads back to Rome where he knows he faces certain persecution and almost certain death. He chooses to follow Jesus as his "Way and his Truth and his Life". He chooses to head into the embrace of God, through his pain and through his own cross in his own life. He does not run away. But he runs toward. The Romans cease him and are about to nail him to the cross to light one of Nero's garden parties. And Peter is standing there, knowing what happens next. And he hears in his mind again the question posed to him along the Appian Way: QUO VADIS? Which way, Peter?

And something wells up within him. And he says quietly: "I am not worthy to be crucified as my Savior Jesus was. Hang me upside down." Which way, Peter? Quo vadis, Peter? That is the WAY..." And hanging there in exquisite pain, experiencing his own cross, he knew his Master and friend, as never before. Why are you crucified upside down, Peter? And then I envision him shouting from the cross –
Because Jesus is my WAY and Jesus is MY TRUTH and Jesus is MY LIFE. And no one comes to the Father but by HIM!!!! Which way, beloved? Quo vadis, O Christian? Quo vadis? Amen and Amen.

**By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!**