

Fifth Sunday in Easter + May 14, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
John 14:1-14

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

In the Gospel of John, just before today's reading Jesus has told the disciples he is leaving them. "Little children, I am with you only a little while longer," he said. "Where I am going, you cannot come." In today's Gospel reading, having heard this, the disciples are confused, bereft, grasping at straws. Why is Jesus leaving them, and where is he going? Jesus tells them, "You know the way to the place where I am going." But they don't understand. Thomas retorts, "Lord, we *don't* know the way to where you are going. How can we know the way?" And when Jesus reassures them that "If you know me, you will know my Father," Philip chimes in, "Well, then, show us the Father, and then we won't ask any more questions!"

People sometimes joke about how clueless the disciples always are throughout the four gospels. Jesus keeps telling them what he's doing, or using parables to explain the kingdom of God, and they just don't get it. This is especially true when Jesus tries to tell them what will happen to him – that he will be crucified and raised on the third day. In Mark, the immediate reaction of James and John is, weirdly, to demand places of prestige in heaven: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," they say. In Matthew, Peter has a temper tantrum and begins to rebuke Jesus: "God forbid it," he shouts, "this must never happen to you!" In Luke, Jesus' explanation of what is going to happen to him meets with dead silence: The disciples understand nothing, we are told. And here in John, when Jesus tells them he'll be leaving them, Thomas and Philip blurt out things that make no sense.

But really, aren't we like the disciples? Even though Jesus' death and resurrection have already taken place, we don't really know where Jesus is, do we? And sometimes doesn't it seem that we, too, are grasping at straws in trying to figure it out? In Matthew, Jesus tells us that "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." But here we are, all 25-plus of us—and where, exactly, is Jesus? Some of us miss the painting of Jesus that used to hang here, but paintings and icons are just two-dimensional representations—Jesus isn't really there in them. Where is he, then? Do we need some kind of heavenly GPS to locate him, like Thomas seems to be asking for?

We find our answer in today's reading, in the midst of Jesus' concern for the disciples. They are worried about where Jesus is going, but Jesus is focused on their well-being after he is gone. Isn't this how it so often is with our loved ones who are facing death? They're not worried about where they are going, because they know—right, Zeke and Eli? (Where is Papa?) They are going to be with Jesus in heaven. Rather, they are concerned about our well-being, we who remain. They want to make sure we are taken care of and provided for.

Jesus is speaking to the disciples, telling them not to be troubled about his departure because he will come to take them to be with him. The first four lines of our reading, again are:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.

Because the Bible is a living book, Jesus is also speaking to us. We often see this text used at funerals, because for those who are grieving it is a great source of comfort and strength. In that context, we can read it as saying that a place for each of us in heaven has been prepared, meaning a

place in Jesus' arms—and that Jesus himself takes us there to rest securely until that last great day when all creation is restored in God.

But there is another way to read the verse “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,” in which “my Father’s house” means permanent union for each of us with God the Father through Jesus Christ. “In my Father’s house” therefore means “with my Father.” And “dwelling places” are not mansions in the sky, but spiritual positions in which God in Christ comes to dwell in us. These verses are therefore describing how the living Christ comes to abide in each of us. And how does this happen? Through Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, as the risen Christ enters into the hearts of the faithful through the Holy Spirit. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul prays, “May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

So when Jesus says in our reading today that “I will come again and will take you to myself,” he is not talking about a location, but about an indwelling.

Now we know where to find Jesus. But how do we get there? How is Jesus the “way to the Father?” Where do we find our heavenly GPS?

Remember Thomas’ words: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” to which Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Jesus is *the way* because he is *the truth*—as the face of God, Jesus is the revelation of the Father. He is the only way we come to know God—he is the gatekeeper, in the words of last week’s Gospel reading from John 10.

Jesus is *the life* because it is only he who can open us to the fullness of life in which God in Christ dwells within us. Again from last week’s Gospel reading, this is why Jesus says “I came that

they may have life, and have it abundantly”—that is, life in the fullest sense. Therefore, *life* comes only through *truth*. This is why telling deliberate falsehoods leads to not to life but to death—death in some form, anyway.

So where is God in Christ? Right here—dwelling in the hearts of all believers. Recently on the radio I heard someone ask, “How can we live out questions of faith in age of liquid modernity, when things are constantly changing all around us?” We do this by clinging to the God in Christ who abides in us. As we heard in our reading from 1 Peter, Christ is the cornerstone of our life, of our spiritual house. Whenever we feel that structure is weakening, we can we can return to this cornerstone, and to the new commandment Jesus has given us: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Love – residing in the heart, in that place where the living Christ dwells.

Amen.