

Sermon on John 14:1-14
Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today's gospel reading from John is most often read at funerals. Do you want to know why? Because of the comforting words at its beginning, when Jesus says, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In 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? And 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."*

In the context of a funeral or memorial service, when someone we love has died, we need some assurance of the life to come, and what will happen after we die. Where will we or our loved one go? This is a highly appropriate text to read in such times, because in it Jesus offers comfort, in that he is preparing a place for us after we die, where we will be with the Lord. As we hold memorial services for sisters and brothers from Redeemer these days – recently for Lynn, Lucille, and in a few more weeks, for Rhynda – this is one of the good and hopeful passages that we draw from for comfort. Not the only one, but a popular one. And on this fifth Sunday of Easter, it is one of those passages in which Jesus gives his disciples a hint that he is going to be leaving them, and where he is going. The problem is, in THEIR context – being with him, and not knowing that he would be leaving – Jesus words in this case just make them more confused! They didn't bring clarity, just more questions. Like Philip, who asked him, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?"*

To which Jesus responded, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Which is another confusing statement, which mystifies the disciples even more! But it gives us a clue that this "dwelling place in Christ Jesus" may not be a "place" at all, that you can find on a map.

So in our context today, as human beings seeking faith in a confusing world, searching for Jesus so that we may find assurance and direction in our lives, this is also a wonderful text – though not for the usual reasons we have found comfort from it in the past!

Ever since Easter Sunday, I have been asking in the children's message, *"Where is Jesus? How can we find him?"* Do we look for Jesus in some dwelling place somewhere after we die, in a place called heaven? Maybe, but maybe not? Where in this passage can we find clues to Jesus' presence?

Some think that heaven is a "place", some "dwelling place" which Jesus has prepared for us. (In some translations, such dwelling places are called "mansions")

– *in my Father's house are many mansions.*) So do each of us Christians receive our reward in some “McMansion in the sky?” We get this idea from ancient, medieval, or Renaissance art, which depict heaven as paradise, an eternal reward for the suffering the faithful experience on earth. Or we may think that heaven is wherever God is (which must be a “place”, right?), which could be anywhere in the expanding universe of our imaginations. So, are we Christians somehow like the crew of the Starship *Enterprise*, seeking God or searching for heaven in “far off galaxies, where no man or woman has gone before?”

So, WHAT IF this passage is not about heaven at all, and really about Jesus' identity (*who* Jesus is, rather than *where* Jesus is)? That is a question which Dr. David Lose asks (theologian, seminary professor and parish pastor).

So, what about this as a clue to Jesus' presence: “*And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going!*” Eureka! Is this the answer? If dwelling with Jesus is not about a “place” at all, then the physical directions are irrelevant! You can't find that place on a road map or on Google maps! You can't “turn right on Dale Street off Interstate 94 and drive one block south to find it at Redeemer – even though Jesus says he is present here, wherever two or three are gathered in his name, and in the bread and wine of holy communion. Jesus is also in the church down the block, and in many other places where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, and wherever bread and wine are served as Jesus' body and blood. Again, the dwelling place with Jesus is found *wherever Jesus is present – which is also whenever Jesus name is called upon in prayer and Jesus' commandment to love one another is obeyed!*

Now, THAT's an intriguing thought! Elizabeth Johnson, professor at Lutheran Institute of Theology in Meiganga, Cameroon offers this response to Thomas's question “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” When Jesus said “*I am the way, the truth and the life*” it was a promise, a word of comfort to his disciples in their despair, that there is no need to panic because he was leaving, no need to search desperately for a secret map or a holy grail. Jesus said, “*If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you know him and have seen him.*” So the search for meaning, for faith in God, and the “location” of Jesus' presence in the world is just as much a yearning for truth – and convincing – about Jesus' *identity* as the divine [and human] “Son of God.” It helps resolve the statement in the Prologue to John's gospel in chapter 1 (which we read on Christmas day) – that *no one has ever seen God* – with Jesus' words to Philip, who had asked “*Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.*” Jesus said to Philip: “*Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father....Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?*”

Whoa. Perhaps the thread of this sermon is wandering to strange galaxies unknown, and you are becoming confused! So let me try to be clear! This passage, in which Jesus gives us comfort by telling his disciples (and us) that he is going to prepare a dwelling place for us where we can always be with him, may not be about a “place” at all – at least not any physical place in the surrounding universe. Not even in another “dimension” for you sci fi enthusiasts out there!

Couldn't “dwelling with Jesus” be more about having faith and trust in Jesus, so that “*we find ourselves in him*”? We can discover who we are as beloved children of God, by looking to Jesus to see God “in him”, and that in our baptism into Christ, we have our true identity, through faith. If in John's gospel the entire mission of Jesus is to “make known the Father”, to reveal who God is and Jesus' identity as God's Son, “*so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ – the Messiah – the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name!*” (John 20:31-32) Not to live righteous lives “so that we may get to heaven sometime, somewhere, after we die – but so that we may come to believe in God's mercy and the promise of life today and forever, through faith in Jesus (through whom we can see God, whom no one has or can physically see!) So, as we heard on the second Sunday of Easter when Jesus blessed Thomas and the disciples saw him after his resurrection, “*blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet have come to believe.*” That's you and me, sisters and brothers!

So Elizabeth Johnson contends that this passage read today from John 14 is not only about life after death (which it is, and is commonly understood), but also a passage *that has everything to do with our lives here and now!* This makes great sense to me as a pastor and preacher, because the whole point of preaching is to take a passage from scripture and help people understand how it relates to our lives of faith today, in your life, as well as in the future. Isn't that why you come to hear scripture read and sermons preached? You're not just here for a bit of bread and a taste of wine, with coffee afterwards – right?

The passage closes with Jesus saying, “*Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and , in fact, will do greater works than these.*” Jesus promises to be with us as we follow him out into the world where he has gone before us. He also promised that God would send the Holy Spirit to be with us with power, to work in and through us to accomplish God's purposes in the world. Johnson says, “*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.*” Well said, Professor Johnson! I think this is a major clue that helps solve the puzzle, and unpack the mystery of Jesus' words.

So in conclusion, heaven is not likely a place, or a McMansion, a room with a view, endless chocolate and a firm mattress. Heaven is surely the presence of

God with us in the world, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. If heaven is not a “place”, could it be following the “way” of Jesus, seeking the “truth” of God, and experiencing the “life” that God offers by doing so? The answer to where or what this “dwelling place” is that Jesus prepares for us is found in the paradox: we say we want to “be with Jesus”, but God comes in Jesus to “be with us”! So God, in Christ, dwells within us, and leads us forth out into the world, to find Jesus in the presence of all God’s children out there, as well as in here (where God also can be found). To see Jesus, and “dwell with Jesus” means that it happens whenever we see or experience the work of God being done – the work of mercy, forgiveness, kindness – out of love for one another, in the name of Jesus. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians he calls them “the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Where and when do we see such things today? Not often? But when we do, perhaps we are seeing the presence of Christ, even if this is not advertised or spoken.

Where did Jesus go? Where is Jesus? How can we find him? We find him where there is healing and reconciliation, mercy and forgiveness, love for enemies and any work that gives life instead of taking it away. Let us seek God in such places and work as this. Better yet, perhaps, let’s do that work ourselves, together is always better, and then keep our eyes and ears open so that we can more easily see and experience God’s presence then and there. In doing such acts of love, might we then see the risen Christ ourselves, and show others the very heart of God?

Amen.