

## **The Way Back Home**

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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John 14:1-14 (NRSV)

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. [2] 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? [3] 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. [4] And you know the way to the place where I am going." [5] Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" [6] Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. [7] If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

[8] Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." [9] Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? [10] Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. [11] Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. [12] 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, because I am going to the Father. [13] I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. [14] If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

## WIND CHIMES

Pastoral care expert, Ronald Richardson in his book, [Creating a Healthier Church](#) says that we can think about the church from an emotional standpoint as a set of wind chimes. Each of us has our note to play, and our assigned place. As long as the wind isn't blowing too hard, and as long as there isn't too much anxiety about what is going on in the church we tend to keep things pretty well balanced.

Oh it's true that we may bump into each other from time to time. But, by and large we are able to work together and sometimes even make beautiful music.

But, in every church (and every life for that matter) there comes a time when the wind blows extra hard, and it is difficult for the wind chimes to keep their place. We have some wind chimes in our back yard, and sometimes that happens to them. The wind blows really hard and tangles them all up. So, at my house if we want to hear any more beautiful music, someone has to go out in the back yard and untangle the wind chimes.

In our lesson for today the wind is about to blow really hard for Jesus and his disciples. Jesus told his disciples that he was leaving them and that where he was going they couldn't follow. The disciples didn't want to believe what Jesus was telling them. Peter protested that he would never

let this happen, that he would always stay with him. And Jesus told Peter, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.”

Now the wind was really beginning to blow; the anxiety level was going even higher among the disciples. The wind chimes were starting to get tangled. And Jesus, seeing the look of dismay on his disciples’ faces said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me.”

In troubled times, when the wind blows really hard, only Jesus can untangle our life. When the wind blows really hard, and we feel like (in the words of that old spiritual) a “motherless child” without a place to lay our head, Jesus says, “I am going to prepare a place for you. I will make a way when there seems to be no way.” What a wonderful summary of the Christian gospel! There’s a place for you - in the heart of God, in this life and the life to come.

Do we believe that? Do we believe that Jesus goes ahead of us in order to prepare a place for us? Do we believe that God is still leading us even when the hurricanes of life make us feel lost and alone? Do we believe that God is with us and for us when we are all tangled up by the anxieties of life?

That’s what today’s lesson teaches us. It is a word for those who are facing strong winds. It is a word for those whose life has been or is about to be turned inside out and upside down.

#### A SPIRITUAL ROADMAP

I often use this passage at a funeral. In that case the text is a powerful word of hope. It is a promise about life beyond life. When we die we will go to a place prepared for us. Eternity is not a place of oblivion but a place of love and acceptance. Jesus will come to us and meet us when we enter the realm of eternity.

I think that’s an appropriate and comforting use of this passage. But, it occurs to me that the promise of a prepared place is not just about the life to come. It’s also about our life together today.

Jesus comes to us to show us the way home when we are lost in this life. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus guides us as we approach an uncertain future.

It was the disciple Thomas who expressed for the rest of the disciples this sense of not knowing what to do or where to turn. Thomas said, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

The disciples were facing a very uncertain future. If Jesus, their guide and teacher was going to leave them, how could they find their way?

We understand. Many of us have known times in our life when the one we trusted and counted on the most was taken away and without that anchor life seemed very uncertain indeed. As it would later happen with Thomas later, we may have even been overcome with doubt.

In response to the anxious doubt of a disciple who is afraid of losing his way Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

## A WORD FOR ANXIOUS DISCIPLES

Now I’ve always looked upon this passage as a source of comfort, a word of hope for the troubled heart. But, the response of many at our Bible study suggested that the comforting promise of a home prepared by Jesus is overshadowed by the implied threat that this home will not be available to everyone.

If the only way to God the Father is through Jesus does that mean that those who have never met Jesus are doomed?

Almost every family has a beloved member who does not follow the way of Jesus. In some parts of the world Christianity is even declared “illegal” by the government. The idea of Jesus being the Son of God is thought to be heretical. Is it right to condemn the people of a country like that when they do not even have a chance to know Christ?

Jesus said “let not your hearts be troubled” but for many this last phrase, “no one comes to the Father except through me” is very troubling indeed. What’s a preacher to do?

In order to interpret Scripture accurately, you have to look at the context. What is the context of this passage?

Is Jesus talking to unbelievers about the eternal state of their soul? No, this passage is not meant for unbelievers. This passage is meant as a word of comfort for Jesus’ disciples. It is part of a section that is commonly called Jesus’ farewell discourse, his last will and testament to his closest disciples.

So, this word about Jesus being the “the way, the truth, and the life” is not meant for unbelievers but for anxious, troubled disciples. Jesus is telling those disciples (and Jesus is telling us as well),

“If you are troubled, if you feel isolated and anxious and alone, if you are filled with doubt, if your find yourself tied up in knots, if you want to untangle your life and go back home, I am the way.

You can find truth and life and the very presence of the Heavenly Father in my words and actions. If you want to find God, look to my life, death and resurrection. These will guide you back to God.” This passage is your spiritual GPS or roadmap.

## THE JESUS WE NEVER KNEW

I’ve found that though we often use the name Jesus, sometimes we act as if we don’t really know him. Did you notice the request of Philip in our lesson? He tells Jesus, “If you really want to calm our fears, show us the Father. If we can see God, then we’ll be satisfied.”

And Jesus replied, "Philip, you've been with me all this time and you still don't know the truth. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father."

It seems to me that we're often like Philip. We have been with Jesus for a long time, but don't always turn to Jesus at the crucial moment.

Let me caution that turning to Jesus is more than just using his name. True faith is about more than just orthodox theology. The heart of true faith lies in our actions. The words of Jesus and the actions of Jesus form the pattern for what it means to really live. In that sense Jesus is the one true way to God.

To put it another way, if you want to see what it means to be truly God and at the same time, if you want to see what it means to be truly human, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. But, that also means that our actions must be based upon the story of Jesus and not just on what we think is right.

There's an old story about a little girl who was drawing a picture in school. The teacher leaned over and asked, "What are you drawing?" The little girl replied, "God."

The teacher laughed and said, "No one knows what God looks like dear." And without missing a beat the little girl replied, "They will when I get finished with this drawing."

The little girl represents the attitude of many who claim to be a disciple of Christ. We say that we follow Jesus, but we really follow that God who has been created in our own image. (That's just the opposite of what the Bible says, by the way. The Bible says that we were created in God's image.)

We who have been with Jesus for such a long time often get it wrong. We think that the true image of God is the one that we have tucked inside our head and anyone who dares to contradict what we have to say on the matter is narrow minded.

#### A "LIBERAL" SOLUTION

Some of you still may not be convinced. You may still think that when Jesus says that he is the only way that the claim is still too exclusive. But, if Jesus is not the way, the truth and the life, then who or what is the way? What is the way to God?

It sounds so humble and reasonable to say that there are many ways to God. This is the typical "liberal" solution. But, all religious ideas are not the same. There might be some common ideas, but there are big differences between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of other religious figures.

If we say that there are many ways to God, then we really become agnostics, in the final analysis not really knowing who God is and what God is about. And the best we can say is that I prefer this way of thinking about God, but it's all based on my thinking. In other words we're still drawing our own picture of God and worshipping not the God revealed in Jesus but the God of our own preference.

But, for those of us who are Christians, the God question has been answered in Jesus. If you want to know what God is like, if you want to find the way to God, look at the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. These form a simplified picture of God that we can understand.

## THE WAY OF EXPANSIVE LOVE

Jesus did not say, "Beliefs about me are the way" or "having the right opinions on my teaching are the way." Jesus said, "I am the way." The way to understanding God runs right through Jesus, and in Jesus we see a portrait of God that is unique.

In Jesus we see that God is a God of compassion who loves even enemies. God is gracious and preaches forgiveness of sin. God reaches out to the untouchables. He heals the sick, rebukes the rich and powerful and raises the dead.

The love of God is expansive. We read today that in my Father's house are many mansions. This means that salvation of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is greater than any of us can imagine. There are many rooms in our Father's house.

That's the God we see in Jesus.

But, as William Willimon put it in a sermon on this passage many people didn't like this expansive God who loved the whole wide world. Many people didn't like this God who ate with sinners and tax collectors. Many people didn't like this God who insisted on social justice and a faith based upon more than self-interest and political expediency.

God did get close to us in Jesus, but we didn't like what we saw. "So we put him to death on a cross. We were determined to keep our religion vague, indefinable, soft, and spiritual, even if we had to crucify Jesus to do it! And we did."

I read of a pastor who went through great pain because of a bitter struggle in his denomination. A group in the church got together, put it to a vote, and forced him out. They accused him of preaching unbiblical sermons.

It wasn't true, but the charges tarred his good name. He sought other churches but none were open to him. But, in spite of it all he remained strong. He told a friend, "Do you know what the most comforting passage in all of Scripture is? We usually wait until funerals to read it. But, I find it comforting now. It's when Jesus says, 'In my Father's house are many rooms, many dwelling places.'

I'm in a church now who acts as if God has a very small house, with only a few rooms and only one door. But, thank God that God's house has many rooms."

## RESURRECTION POWER

God does have a big, expansive house, and we learned on Easter that this expansive love would not be defeated by those who were narrow-minded. The love of God as revealed in Jesus was bigger than even death itself. The world sought to crucify such expansive love. On the third day God raised that love from the grave and changed the world forever.

With God there is always hope.

Even death cannot foil the plans of this mighty God, and the Bible tells us that death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Incredibly, Jesus promises fearful, confused disciples that they will have access to this resurrection power. They will not only do what Jesus did; they will do even greater things.

With the price of gas rising to almost \$3.50 a gallon, there is a power shortage in our world. But, Jesus tells us that there will be no power shortage in his kingdom. In fact Jesus told his anxious disciples, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." John 14:14 (NRSV)

Now let's be real about this. Jesus is certainly not preaching some form of prosperity theology. Jesus is not saying that we can get good grades without studying very hard. Jesus is not saying that a quick prayer will find us a parking place in a crowded lot. Jesus is not saying that our stock portfolio will beat the Dow Jones Average.

But, if we pray in his name, that is if pray for the things that he would have us pray for, that prayer will receive a positive answer. If we pray keeping in mind the compassion, forgiveness and love of God as revealed in the life of Jesus, then that prayer will receive a positive answer.

Resurrection power will become a part of our life, and we will become (as the Book of Order puts it) a "provisional demonstration of the kingdom of God." We are God's pilot project or as a famous professor from Harvard once put it a seminar, "We are God's guinea pigs!" God is doing something amazing in the world, and we get to help.

Wherever the true gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached in the world, wherever people have truly believed that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, things have changed for the better. People who at first seemed to be powerless have been personally transformed into mighty leaders, and God has enabled them in many ways to transform their part of the world.

Many of us are concerned, as we should be, about the energy crisis. But, I believe that we have more energy than we think. We just have to learn how to tap into that energy. We have to learn how to get energy from the sun and the wind, and we have to work together. The greatest energy in the world is human energy and our ability to strive together for the common good.

But, in a more profound way, as a community of faith we have to learn how to tap into resurrection power. We have to learn how to get beyond our fears and move on with Jesus. We have to learn how to live compassion and forgiveness and justice. We have to believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and show that belief by the choices we make when times get tough.

I remember John Kennedy saying that “when the going gets tough the tough get going.” That is not such a bad saying for those of us who would be disciples of Jesus. It’s easy enough to say that we’ll follow Jesus when the winds are calm and the living is easy.

But, what do we believe when the storm winds blow? What do we believe when jobs are cut and housing prices fall? What do we believe when death draws near?

Jesus encourages us to have faith, to trust the grace, hope and forgiveness of God. Jesus tells us, “Don’t be so afraid that you will lose your way. Keep your eyes focused on me. I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the way to the Father.”

Some of us here today will be facing winds of hurricane force in the near future. For some of us the winds will be expected and for some of us the winds will come as an unwelcome surprise.

But, no matter what our situation there is still hope. There is the promise of God in his Son Jesus that there is a way home no matter what the problem. In life and in death we do belong to God.

May God help us lean upon and act upon those promises today.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)