

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 John 14:1-14 And Even Death Itself Has Passed . . .

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“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many room; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From no on, you do know him and have seen him.”

I remember it like it was yesterday and yet it was twenty years ago. I was lying in my bed, the very bed that just last weekend my dad and I set up in Nathan’s room—his first big boy bed. At that time it was my big girl bed and I was a girl somewhere on the journey to becoming a young woman—a girl full of anxiety and dread the night before my first day of junior high. I’d excelled in the nurturing cocoon of my elementary school but now it was time to leave that building and start a new life at the junior high—which shared a building with the high school. And although my future was filled with possibility and I had no reason to believe that I wouldn’t succeed in the new school, I was terrified. And so instead of getting a restful night’s sleep, I got a tummy full of butterflies the likes of which not even the brand spanking new outfit that was laid out beside my bed so that I’d look good on the first day of my new life as a junior high student—even that couldn’t calm the flurry of anxiety within me. I had heard good things about junior high; I’d even visited the school the previous spring. My brother was a sophomore in that school, my friends would all be going to junior high with me, and—for Pete’s Sake—my dad’s office was across the hall from my locker. And still, even though I had some idea of what to suspect, even though I would be surrounded by people who cared about me, even though I would be dressed in my fashionable new duds—junior high was still, on that evening, the great unknown in my life and I was alone and scared, getting tangled in the sheets as I rolled myself around, seeking solace and comfort in that big girl bed—feeling every bit a little girl, a scared little girl.

Have you had such an evening—a night full of anxiety because you knew that at the dawning of the next day life as you knew it would cease to exist? Perhaps it was the night before you left home for college, or maybe it was the night before you shipped out for the service. Maybe it was the night before major surgery or even the night before your wedding day. These “nights before” are a challenge because they are the times in this life when we most realize that we are on the brink of the unknown . . . when we face the fact that we are not in control, independent, and all-knowing. These are the times when we recognize just how small and vulnerable we really are as we, mere human beings, roll around in the great big bed of God’s sacred universe. These times are truly troubling.

And perhaps at no times are our hearts more troubled by thoughts of the unknown than when we think about death. We’ve heard the quote from Ben Franklin hundreds of times—the only two sure things in life are death and taxes. Yes, we don’t doubt the reality of death—but that’s the only thing we know about it. It’s the other stuff we’re not sure about—when will it happen, how will it happen, whether or not we will know it’s happening, and what happens after it happens . . . These are the unknowns that can create in us sleepless nights the likes of which can’t be rivaled by the night before the first day of junior high. These are thoughts that many find deeply troubling.

And yet, here is Jesus—a light of hope shining in through the cracks of the bedroom door, shedding light on our fears and anxieties. And from the other side of that door we hear his words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

While the idea of Jesus as the divine innkeeper in the sky is comforting, it doesn't get at the deeper meaning of his words in this passage. A commentator on the passage writes, “. . . it is critical here that the reference to ‘my Father’s house’ not be taken as a synonym for heaven. Instead, this reference to the Father’s house needs to be read first in the context of the mutual indwelling of God and Jesus, a form of ‘residence’ that has been repeatedly stressed from the opening verses of the Gospel [according to John]. Throughout the gospel, location has consistently been a symbol for relationship.”¹ What Jesus is inviting us to, indeed what he is preparing for us, is a place in God’s heart—a place in God’s realm, not necessarily a place in a geographical location someplace in the sky.

The words of John’s gospel that follow these are helpful in explaining the reality of this relationship. Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me . . .” I realize that these words have created stumbling blocks for many of us in our faith journeys—especially as we’ve grown to know and love people of other faiths. After all, I surely want the good Rabbi Chava’s and my singing act to continue beyond the boundaries of this world and for many, these words indicate that that’s an impossibility as these words imply that only Christians get to heaven. But if we understand that Jesus’ words about the after-life—about his father’s house—aren’t referencing heaven, then we realize these words aren’t a statement about salvation or who has a place in eternity. Rather, these words describe the very precious reality of what makes Christianity different than, not BETTER than, other faiths. Because of Jesus, we have a relationship with God like Jesus has. Jesus’ relationship to God as a father, or as a mother, or as some other incarnation of a kind, loving, compassionate care-taker whose love knows no conditions or boundaries—Jesus relationship to God as that loving and divine being makes our relationship to that loving and divine being possible. Christians are unique in our belief of a familial, intimate relationship with God. After all, Jesus goes on to say, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” Isn’t that incredible? In that culture among those people the belief was that anyone who glimpsed the face of God would be struck dead on the spot. That’s why Moses saw a burning bush—to have seen God would have been the end of it. But here is Jesus saying that his disciples have not only known God—but they have known and seen God because they have known and seen Jesus. And so have we.

No, we’ve never seen the long-haired, dark eyed Middle Eastern man known as Jesus of Nazareth who walked the rocky hills of that rugged terrain so many years ago. But we have seen his spirit at work in our lives, here in the snowy glistening landscapes of northern Michigan. We have, in the words of the Apostle Paul, seen through a glass dimly. We have glimpsed eternal life with Christ—not because folks have died and come back to life and told us about it but rather because we have experienced God’s spirit at work in this world, in the here and now. And for all the joy and pleasure and love those moments brought us—the first time he said “I love you”, the birth of children, the pride of graduation, the miracle of restored health, the wonder of marriage, the first time your grandchild greeted you with a smile of recognition—a thousand fold will be our experiences of those things in the world that is to come after these earthly bodies of ours have died. The after life and heaven and eternity—they’re still the great unknown—and yet not all things will be unknown to us. We will recognize the love, the mercy, the compassion, the joy, the intimacy—something of that world has been made known to us in this world. And it is that something that will create that bridge—that connection for us.

In the prayer thanking God for the life of the deceased that I say at funerals there is a line that reads ‘and we give you thanks that for our loved one even death itself has passed.’ And strangely, every time I say that line, I envy the deceased. For that person now knows in full what I can only know in part, that this unknown that we can so fear and dread is, in so many ways, already known to us. The here after is just that—it’s here but it’s after here and so we already know in part what the here is. And that is a source of great comfort for which I am very grateful.

¹ Gail R. O’Day, *The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. IX, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 740.

We opened this service with “The Rainbow Connection”, a favorite song from *The Muppet Movie*. To me it speaks of the divine bonds of love that hold us together in this world and the next in spite of our inability to fully comprehend those bonds. I close this sermon with a portion of another song from that movie. “I’m Going to Go Back There Someday” speaks to the mystical reality of the here after—that heaven, if it is a place, is so much more than a place. It is a reality of relationship and communion with each other and God the likes of which we have only glimpsed in this world, the reality of which we will fully embrace in the next.

This looks familiar, vaguely familiar
Almost unreal, yet, it’s too soon to feel, yet,
Close to my soul, and yet, so far away.
I’m going to go back there some day.

There’s not a word yet, for old friends who’ve just met;
Part heaven, part space, or have I found my place?
I’ve never been there but I know the way.
I’m going to go back there some day.