

**“Places of Dwelling”**  
**The Fifth Sunday of Easter – 5.10.2020 – John 14:1-14/A**

When I was growing up, my father’s hobby was training and showing jumping horses, which means I rode primarily to exercise our horses. I remember many a humid July day spent walking around our field next to a hot horse to cool it down, when all I really wanted to do was cool down myself. Sometimes my Dad would come alongside me with his horse, and we’d walk those long loops together. Not often, but sometimes. Our conversations were often awkward and some-times boring, because I just didn’t understand what he was trying to work out in his head. Finances, horses, daughters... But those talks, (though awkward and boring and full of homegrown knowledge) would be so very welcome now – as I walk this journey – seeking the wisdom of those like my Dad - who always just KNEW.

Did you ever notice how often the Bible stories are set in the context of a journey? Journeying runs deep in our spiritual roots – Abraham was nomadic – Moses as well – shepherds moved with their flocks and Jesus’ ministry was itinerant - so different from our relatively stable lives that include homes, (even if there have been a number of them.) “The house I grew up in” is not something you hear in scripture. In fact, Jesus only refers to his own residence when Mary and Joseph discover him teaching in the Temple as a young lad, “*Did you **not know** that I would be in my Father’s house?*”

For Jesus, his Father’s house was the Temple in Jerusalem, the place where heaven and earth were connected, a place where God was present, the place where God dwelled, abided, and remained. Today, we call our sanctuary “God’s house.” For, journeying and identifying places to dwell cover a good deal of the story told in Scripture. Actually, this idea of dwelling (John uses the term “abiding”) is traditional Jewish terminology for **heaven**. And here’s the twist: for the Jews who followed Jesus, Heaven was not so much a place or destination or location, but a journey, a relationship of living with God forever in the world that **is**, as well as the world that is **to come**. So ponder: Heaven is real, both after life and as we live it.

In the scene right before this one, Peter has asked Jesus where he is going, and Jesus replied, “*where I am going you cannot follow me now.*” But Peter wants to know why, insisting that he is faithful,

“*I will lay down my life for you.*” That is when Peter is told that he will deny even knowing Jesus and turn his back on him in his hour of greatest need. The next thing Jesus says is pure grace. “*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*” Imagine how Peter heard this. After just learning that he would allow his fear to lead him into denying his Messiah – Peter, the rock on which Jesus would build his church – would fail his Lord. But Jesus already knew that. Jesus wants to reassure Peter and all his followers, “*I am here. You are not alone.*” A word that comes as healing ointment on a disciple’s anxious soul. Can’t you just see Jesus, sitting at the table of their last supper together, shifting the conversation, weaving a beautiful image of a future that apparently includes them being together. “*In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...*” He is leaving them for a short time. This time, he is not preparing them for his death, but for what will come next. He is, even now, on the journey to prepare a place for them...a homeplace that will include each of them and God. As St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, “*Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our*

*heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.*" Having a home is wonderful, but Jesus making room for us to be with him in the presence of his Father, always, is even better.

In just a few hours, the disciples will be separated from their Lord, and they will find themselves filled with uncertainty and fear, because they will not know where things are headed. We can relate to that, can't we?

**Thomas** echoes some of our concerns when he says, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* We, too, may feel ourselves wandering or fear we have lost the way. Our schools and our teams, our jobs and our entertainment had all been planned out for us by someone else, and now...well, things change. As always, Jesus responds with a word of hope, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me."* But **Philip** wants to get back to basics *"Just show us the father and we will be satisfied."* Sounds a lot like Philip is reading Thomas' lines! **Show me**, he says. So Jesus points Philip back to the work they had already been doing, right next to him, as they ate and healed and spread the good news, while living among people where they were dwelling. Jesus reminds them of all that God has done through them, and how much more they will do from the homes in which they will dwell with God.

I have been reading a lot lately about the challenge to leaders who must walk with people as we ponder a future that no one can see. I believe Jesus' words can speak to us just as clearly as they did to his disciples a few days before they would be called into uncertain futures. One piece of advice might be that the dwellings that Jesus went to prepare are not the same for everyone. **Peter** needed assurance that he would be strong enough to fulfill his role as the rock-solid foundation of the church; **Thomas** is seeking a structured environment, where he knows what to expect and what is expected of him; **Philip** wants a place where he can be confident of his faith and confident in God. Different dwellings – different ways that God abides and is present in each situation of each individual journey. Each prepared for us by Jesus himself.

Can you even imagine all the different dwellings we may find ourselves inhabiting on the other side of this, The Great Pause? Some interpreters have advised that we might need to envision not just one, but a variety of responses to this global pandemic. For some are convinced that this is simply a storm, (a blizzard!) an event that will pass. Others see our present as the beginning of a season, lasting much longer than one storm, but encompassing a time of storms, both large and small; and some see the other side as an epoch – a time when the earth and humanity are reset by events that change us at our foundation, and affect us for generations to come. How might Jesus be preparing each of us for all of these possibilities?

If you were Jesus, going to prepare a place for you – what would that dwelling feel like? These days, maybe for the first time in some of our lives – we are privileged to have a moment of control in an out of control world. We are poised as on tiptoe – to prepare what our lives and the lives of our families will look like after the storm; or through the coming season; or as we re-create our world for a different way of life (not a new normal) but in a new reality: a reality that brings you life, that brings new life: whether it is a hobby, care of Creation, music and art, providing comfort and resources for those in need, reflecting, praying, dwelling with God as God dwells with us. It may sound old-fashioned, but back to the basics is exactly where Jesus left the disciples: doing what they had learned as they journeyed with him, and he lived among them.

There will come a day and a time when we will look back on this Great Pause in the same way as our parents and grandparents recalled making it through the Great Depression or the War to End All Wars. We will be shaped by these times - as we are being molded by whose we are. And who we are will be re-created by how open we are to seeing this experience and opportunity through God's eyes. Those eyes that so loved the whole world. Those eyes that walk beside us.

And after this struggle perhaps we will look back and think, "*Jesus was with me and I didn't even know it,*" but I don't think so. I think we are all keenly aware that God is here, and knows that we are worried, upset, lost, and wanting, yearning to see face to face. So Jesus points us back to the basics of our faith. "*Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me.*"

I encourage you to be present on this journey - dwelling with God, in the place Jesus has prepared for you. And abide in the truth of Jesus' words, *where I am, you will be also*. I leave you today with ***A Prayer of Thomas Merton:***

O Lord God, I have no idea where I am going,  
I do not see the road ahead of me,  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself,  
And that fact that I think  
I am following Your will  
Does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please You  
Does in fact please You.  
And I hope I have that desire  
In all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything  
Apart from that desire to please You.  
And I know that if I do this  
You will lead me by the right road,  
Though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust You always  
Though I may seem to be lost  
And in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear,

For You are ever with me,  
And You will never leave me  
To make my journey alone. AMEN.

Pastor Susan Langhauser, Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS.

**Resources:** Nathan Kirkpatrick: *How to think about what's next when the future is unclear*, Duke Divinity School, April 2020; Jason Fisher, Champaign, IL for ELCA Faith Lens, 4/2020; Rev. Leigh Spruill, DayOne 5/10; Thomas Merton, Pax Christi, Benet Press, Erie, PA.