

# ***The Way to God***

John 14:1-12

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## **John 14:1-12 (NRSV)**

'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.\* 5Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' 6Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7If 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.' 9Jesus 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"? 10Do 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. 11Believe 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. 12Very 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.

I attended a memorial service a few weeks ago that has haunted me in a rather blessed way. The 59-years-young man remembered in this particular service was not particularly religious, and neither was the service to honor his memory. There were no blowhard clergy (thank goodness for that), but also there was no liturgy, there were no prayers, there was no sacred music. Imagine what this would do to a pastor, make him rather fidgety. I found myself at a few moments humming "Great is Thy Faithfulness," just to get it in. This was just a simple service of memories, crying, laughter, and gratefulness. My pastoral sensibilities were a little shaken by this approach, as it was unfolding, but hey, I'm a cool and with-it Christian pastor so I rolled with it. And as I followed along, I started to make out something deep and unexpectedly revealing.

It helped my experience of this moment that I did not know this man named Dan well, so I could receive the witness of his life from family and friends. The funeral home could barely hold all the attendees, and I'm sure a CD couldn't hold all the speakers and stories about Dan. Person after person came to bear witness to a man who was exceptionally giving, outwardly loving to all people, inclusive of everybody, he was always the guy who found the person left out in the room at talked to them. He did, as my old coach used to say, "left it all on the floor" in his young life for his kids, for his family, for his friends, and, it would seem, for many, many strangers.

So there was not one mention of God or Heaven, and certainly not Jesus, in the whole service, but it was not lost on me that back behind the podium from which all these memories came forth, was all that needed to be said, a wooden cross, and it was empty. What I witnessed, in this moment, without one theological or liturgical word, was something in my vocabulary called resurrection, a life whose love and giving had already begun to outlive his days, which had already inspired new life to be born, like a fumbly Christian pastor recommitting himself to being more of a father and a friend like Dan. This was a non-practicing, seemingly self-disavowed Christian who lived a life that seemed unmistakably Christ-like. The experience, and the God's revelation in Dan's life, left me inspired, if not a little dizzy.

Do not fear, believe, says Jesus, in God and in me. In my father's house there are many dwelling places, he says to Thomas. And note that here, the father's house is more than a metaphor for Heaven, here, most things in John are more than they seem. John's gospel repeatedly uses location as a symbol for relationship, to dwell in God's house is also to be in relationship with God, and in God's house there are many

rooms.<sup>1</sup> I.E. God has plenty of room for relationship with you, and me, and everyone. I go to prepare a place for you, says Jesus, a place for you to be in relationship with God, so where I am you may be too, filled with all the fullness of God.

Thomas, though, misunderstands. Where are you going? And how can we know the way? That's really the question that most of us come here to ask every week, isn't it? Many of us have been in church long enough to know about Jesus. But we come here with a question on our mind, I think, Jesus, where are you going? And what does where you are going have to do with me? We're here, O Lord, working hard to do well in life, and yet the gentle waters in which we were wading have risen and swept us away and tossed us about, and we're left struggling, perhaps even drowning with this sickness, with this unemployment, with this distant marriage, with this lost child or lost parent. We're drowning in this relentless culture of achievement whispering, "you're not good enough." So Jesus, these are important questions we come before you and ask, where are you going, and what does where you're going have to do with me? And how then will we know the way there?

I am the way, the truth, and the life, says Jesus. I am. Person, not doctrine. God embodied to be with you and me and to love us. Self-giving unto death, and beyond, risen for you and me. I am the way, the truth, and the life that is the light of all people. I am revelation of God and call to you and me, to live the obedient, courageous, faithful, loving, and giving life for which we are all created. I am inviting you to experience not just eternal life as an extension on the one that you already have, but as an opportunity, here and now, to live the life that is eternal, the outpouring, forgiving, and loving life that is endowed with great and transformative power for everyone, everywhere.

The way to God is standing here in front of you, Thomas, do you see and hear and feel me? God is so close to you, at this moment, you should be able to hear God breathing, God's arms are wrapped around you so closely, you should be able to feel their embrace. So to be a disciple of this person, this God, Jesus, means not simple mimicry, but to follow his "way," to live in our time the same way he lived in his -- as a sign and as a servant of the reign of God. To follow Jesus requires us not to choose 12 disciples for ourselves or perform miracles, but to take his life project -- making the coming of God's reign of Shalom, God's deep peace, real and immediate and our own.<sup>2</sup> How strange and unfortunate that this, one of the most expansive and inclusive texts in all the Bible gets wielded as a way to justify Christian triumphalism and superiority, when its expressed purpose is to move beyond religion and doctrine and laws and into the realm of the life which we live. No one gets to the father except through me, the revealed way to God, the life that is eternal.

Thomas persists in his confusion, Lord just show us God and we will be satisfied. To which Jesus replies, let me be clear, if you see me, you see God, because God works through me. If you don't believe this, just look at the works themselves, says Jesus, they are inspired by and powered by God, not me. Testifying, healing, teaching, being with the poor, ushering forth a new peace, these are not my works alone, they are something more.

After Jesus explains clearly who he is, the way to relationship with God, he takes one more step with Thomas, and with us. Very truly, I tell you (this is what Jesus says when he's about to say something big), the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these. Say what? Faith in Jesus Christ, according to this text, belief that he is come to show us the way to the life that is eternal, brings out our divinely ordained capacity to love and serve and bring forth new life and hope in the world, it would seem. It also opens up your mind and your heart to the realm of the spirit, active and working in the world, and in all our lives, that has the potential to shape each of us into a piece of God's kingdom.

Now I don't know what any of this means, I'm just a preacher. But I think I glimpsed, for a brief moment, the reality of Christ's way and truth and life and its capacity to change us and the world. One of the benefits of preparing for a life of ministry is that even though we aspiring pastors struggle to be good and

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<sup>1</sup> Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John, The New Interpreter's Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Cox, "Many Mansions or One Way? The Crisis in Interfaith Dialogue," *The Christian Century*, 1998.

faithful like everyone else, sometimes we're required to be in giving, outward situations, living the Christian life if you will. As part of this process, I served as a chaplain at a hospital in Atlanta one year, and found myself at the bedside of a too-young woman near the end of her life.

It felt like a weighty moment, so I summoned my best theological words, my deepest meditations about this sacred moment, this end and new beginning. I fumbled my way through a prayer for wholeness, a prayer in trust of the resurrection, a prayer for new life for this poor, dying woman. I think she noticed my anxiousness, and I'm sure she noticed the way my words didn't make sense. So she took my hand. And while she couldn't make sentences without being interrupted by gasps for oxygen, she continued my prayer for me.

She prayed for me. She said O Lord pour out your holy spirit upon this chaplain pastor, uphold him in the trust that your resurrection is real, help him to know that his words only point to what is the truth. And she continued her prayer, she could not stop her eloquence. She prayed for the doctors and nurses and their giving spirit, for the sick everywhere, all those breathing their last breath, all those in war torn countries, all those who experience oppression and fear. She prayed for the hungry, for everyone in the world, at her weakest moment. And so I found myself, in living for just a moment in the way and truth and life of Jesus, at the bedside of a "needy" soul, experiencing the deep and spiritual power that we miss when we veer off the way, experiencing the wonder-filled life that is eternal, experiencing, just for a moment, the plane of our existence that can only be divine and that will most certainly change you and me and the whole world.

I am the way and the truth and the life. I am, this person, this being. There is no single religion to get you to God, but there is a way to be, there is a truth to understand, there is a life to be lived. This has been revealed for us in Jesus Christ, thank God.