

John 14:1-14

Jesus said:

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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' 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"? 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. 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. 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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Ann Patchett's latest novel *The Dutch House* centers around a big old mansion built by a Dutch family that made a fortune on cigarette sales in World War One. It's unwieldy and unchanged much from its 1920's origins, and it becomes the centering character of the story.

In the opening chapter, the now adult child Danny recalls the first time the woman who would be his stepmother arrived at the house. And we see through the child's eyes both the way this woman seemed more focused on the house than on meeting her friend's children, and the sense Danny had, even then, that he and his sister Maeve were inconveniences that came with the father and the house.

Their father had bought this house thinking it would be a gift to the children's mother, and they had taken for granted the nooks and crannies of it, the bay window with a bench and a curtain, the way you could see all the way through from the glass front door to the back yard.

But over time the house becomes a sign of loneliness, as their new stepmother decides that her own children should have the best bedrooms, as tragedy strikes and the house itself becomes their last link to the people who loved them as children.

It was their father and mother's house, and then just their father's house, but once their father is no longer with them, it is just a house, a strange oversized symbol of someone who has mistaken grandeur for relationship. The novel is about nothing so much as death, and how absent their father's protection and love, the house is just a sign of loss. It will never be their home, if it ever was.

A house is not necessarily a home;

Many people are reassessing their sense of home in these days, as we are all forced to stay put. Our homes are now offices and school rooms and restaurants and every activity that makes us human in one place. Some people are discovering that the place they sleep used to feel like little more than a hotel, but now they need it to be much more than that. Others are returning to their childhood homes and trying to figure out how not to feel like children again. But

we all need our houses to be homes – which means we need to be in relationship, even if we are alone in our rooms.

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This morning's passage from John is not about a house. It is about home.

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?

Prepare a place for you to dwell with me.

In our individual society we have too often imagined Jesus as some sort of heavenly housekeeper, going to get our room ready at the Royal Heavenly Crown Hotel. We imagine a sumptuous room without paying attention to the most important feature of this place – it will be where he is.

In ancient Israel, dwelling places were added on to homes all the time. When a child grew to an adult and was ready to marry and start their own family, the betrothed young man would add on a room to his family's home, creating a new dwelling place. When the room was ready and the engagement was over, the couple would be married and the new husband would take his spouse home to this new dwelling place, making room literally in his Father's house for his beloved.

Imagine the excitement of a young man, mapping out where his new family would dwell, expanding the place he knew so well and preparing that new life expanding his family home. Jesus describes his going away, the whole movement of his death and resurrection and his ascension, as this joyous preparation, expanding his own relationships with God in such a way that there will be room for us to be part of that family too.

And we all know that room in a new family is never just about where you stay. You can be given the best bedroom in the house and still have the sense that you do not really belong. The history of the church is fraught with communities trying to welcome new voices in and let them be as much a part of the home as anyone else.

This is why 1 Peter is so careful to declare that the community of the early church is being built by God together, living stones with someone who was rejected by the world at its center.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

All of these descriptors could have been things that pointed out someone's ethnicity, their parentage, their DNA. Priesthood was an inherited vocation in biblical times; But Peter says to the whole church, to this motley mix of men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles -- you ARE a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Because God has made it so. There is no race, no ethnicity, no citizenship that is more important and God has made room for all of us.

In my Father's house there are many rooms.

So often we have heard the idea of "room" as a physical space, as if our lives are some sort of down payment on a heavenly mansion, and Jesus is just the key card we use to unlock the door.

But the room Jesus is talking about is a place within the relationship he has with the creator of the world. That relationship Jesus has with the mother of all things is absolutely intimate and totally secure. His death and resurrection and ascension were all about making room in that relationship for all of us too. We don't have to wedge our way into God's heart; we are not the stepchildren always trying to find a place where we can be accepted fully into our parents' home.

What makes a house a home is the dwelling – the abiding. And the abiding is so important because this is the moment when Jesus is about to leave them.

They have just finished their last meal with Jesus. He has washed their feet, and given them the new commandment, that they love one another. Jesus has all but said that he is going to a place where they cannot come, but none of it likely makes any sense to them at this point.

All they know is that something seems to be ending, but what lies ahead is still so utterly unclear. There are hints that things are going to be very difficult, because Jesus recognizes that Judas will betray him; and he predicts that Peter will deny him.

Peter must wonder what on earth could happen that he would leave his teacher and master?

And then Jesus launches into this long speech about going away:

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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.'

And the disciples retort – Jesus we don't know where you are going?

I am the way and the truth and the life.

Once again, just like modern Christians have focused too much on the dwelling place and not the one we are going to dwell WITH, Christians have ripped these words out of context to use this verse about the way and the truth and the life as some sort of abstract statement about other religions. Which would be a pretty preposterous thing to be doing in your last moments with the people you love.

Just like the house isn't about the house, but about who you dwell with

The way isn't about a particular road, but about who you walk it with.

Jesus doesn't answer Thomas' question by leaving him with a 7 step map to eternal salvation. He simply points again to relationship:

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

The disciples can't possibly know what Jesus will be facing as he is arrested, and condemned to death and tortured and killed. But before they face the most

bewildering and confusing time of their lives, when everything they thought they knew about the future is gone, Jesus tells them about relationship, a relationship that cannot be destroyed by death.

I AM – he references the very name of God, the eternal nature of God, the name that can be translated in present tense or in a sort of becoming tense – I will be who I will be.

Jesus promises a relationship that won't be held down by the usual sense of time that we have, that won't be limited by the power of death.

Before Good Friday he gives them this Easter promise:

I AM the way.

Not I will be the way after you die, but **I am**, wherever you are now, even when you do not know the way.

Here's the thing: we have a living Jesus as the way. So we do not need to have perfect signage or an unchanging map for what lies ahead.

We have Jesus as a living truth, so we do not need to hurt or kill any other being in order to defend that truth. He is doing just fine in spite of our doubts or someone else's misdirections.

We have Jesus as our life. So no matter what the future holds, our life is in God's hands. Faith in Jesus is not some sort of currency we will cash in to get through the heavenly gates.

Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare room for us, room in the Father's heart.

You don't know all there is to know. But you know this – Jesus has already made room for you in this dwelling of God.

The prayer that many of us associate with Holden Village, the prayer of good courage, actually predates Holden by a good 50 years. It was written by the same man who helped start the Service of Lessons and Carols at Kings' College, a tradition which began 10 years after the end of World War 1 and the 1918 flu pandemic.

Eric Milner-White who no doubt knew much of the uncertainty we now know, reminded us that faith is not about knowing the road ahead of you. It is about knowing the one who travels with us:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.