

The Well-Remembered Word:
Remembering the Comfort of Christ
First Baptist Richmond, May 7, 2023
John 14:1-14

Let not 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?

Today we continue a series called, “The Well-Remembered Word,” in which we are imagining how some of the people who knew Jesus best and loved him most might have eulogized him. So far we have heard from Mary Magdalene, Thomas “the Twin,” the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and last week from the Apostle John, the author of the Fourth Gospel, who had so much to say that we’ve invited him back this week. Without further introduction, let me turn things over to John, the Beloved Disciple.

Well, thank you. Thank you for coming. And thank you for listening to my memories of the Word-made-Flesh. Today I’m remembering what happened in that upper room on the night he was betrayed. Most of you weren’t there, but if you have read my Gospel you know that Jesus got up from the table, wrapped a towel around his waist, filled a basin with water, and then washed our feet. Of all the memories in my head that one may be the most unforgettable: that moment when he took my own feet in his hands, and washed them, and looked up at me with eyes full of love. I couldn’t say anything for the lump in my throat, but if I could I might have said, “You’re leaving us, aren’t you?” Because it was obvious that something was about to happen.

After he came back to the table he asked us to wash one another’s feet, just as he

had washed ours. And then, a little later, he commanded us to love one another, just as he had loved us. He didn't say it out loud but you could tell that he was trying to get us ready to live without him. I think that's when the first tear rolled down my cheek, and I think that's when he said: "Don't let your hearts be troubled." Because I wasn't the only one. He could tell, just by looking around at us, that we were all troubled. We were like family members gathered around the deathbed of a loved one, straining our ears for every last word. And Jesus did not disappoint.

He gave us some good ones.

After he said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled," he said, "You believe in God; believe also in me," as if belief were the remedy for a troubled heart. Maybe it is. And then he said something I almost wish I had never written down, not because it's not true, but because it has been so misunderstood. Jesus said, "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?" The reason I wish he hadn't said it that way, and the reason I wish I hadn't written it down, is that ever since my Gospel was published people have been asking me about the Father's house, and how to get there, and what their dwelling place will be like. That is, they have been thinking about it primarily as a *place*, and some of them have been thinking about it as a *very nice* place. I understand one of your translations uses the word "mansion," and some people can scarcely think of anything else. "I'm going to have a mansion in heaven!" they say. No matter how poor and pitiful their lives have been on earth, they seem to believe that when they get to heaven they will live in the most extravagant house anyone has ever imagined. Well, I don't know. They may be exactly right about that. But that wasn't the point I was trying to make and I'm almost

certain it wasn't the point Jesus was trying to make.

What he said was this: "I'm going to prepare a place for you, and then I'm going to come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also." I don't know what you hear in that statement, but what I heard in that moment was that heaven is not a place, but a person. I didn't care what it looked like, or where I got to lay my head. I didn't care if it was a ten-million-dollar mansion or a two-bit boarding house. I only cared that Jesus was going to be there because wherever he was, was heaven. Do you know what I mean? Have you ever loved anybody like that? Where you didn't care where you were or what you were doing, so long as it was with them?

And that reminds me of another thing I almost wish I had never written down, and that's the verse people now refer to as John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." I mean, it's true. It's beautiful. But some people get so focused on the everlasting life part that all they want to know is what they have to do to make sure that they live forever, and suddenly it's not about Jesus anymore; it's about them. "How do *I* get to heaven? How can *I* have a life that never ends? How do *I* get a mansion with a view so I can watch the sun set over the crystal sea?" Does that not sound a little selfish to you?

What I was trying to say is that life begins in a whole new way when you get to know Jesus. And when you believe in him, really believe *in* him and not just believe things about him, well, that's living! In the Greek language it is literally "the life of the ages," which some people have translated as everlasting life, which some people have interpreted as life that never ends. Let me just ask you: if you were sentenced to life in

prison, would you want that life to last forever? No. Of course not. But you also know about those moments when you felt so completely alive that you never wanted them to end. That's the life of the ages! That's what I'm talking about. It's not quantity; it's quality. And for me, that kind of life happened when I was with Jesus. "God loved the world so much," I said, "that he gave us his Son!" Yes! That's what we were longing for! That's what makes life worth living, whether it's a day, or a year, or a thousand years. So, to believe in him the way you believe in those people you love most in this world is not a requirement for everlasting life: it is life itself. But I also believe that life like that never comes to an end.

I think that's what Jesus was trying to tell us on that night when our hearts were so troubled. He said, "I'm going to prepare a place for you in my Father's house, and when it's ready I'm going to come and get you and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also." It reminded me of how they used to do it back in Capernaum when I was growing up. Some young man would ask a girl to marry him and then he would go back to his father's house and start building on a room. It might take as long as a year for him to finish it, because he wanted everything to be perfect when the wedding was over and he brought her back to the place he had prepared. That's what came to mind when Jesus said he was going to go and prepare a place for us. And then he said he was going to come back and get us, and take us to himself, so that where he was we could be also. And then, for some reason, he said we already knew the way to the place where he was going. And that just confused us. We sat there for the longest time until Thomas finally said, "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"

You've already heard from Thomas. You know he had his reasons. He was

determined to follow Jesus. He needed to know the way. But Jesus said, “I *am* the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And again, if there is anything I wish Jesus hadn’t said, or I hadn’t written down, it might be this. Because the same people who are so concerned about living forever in a mansion in heaven have used this verse to keep others out. I don’t know why. Maybe they think heaven will get too crowded. Maybe they want to be sure they get one of the good mansions, one with a view. Maybe they have forgotten that Jesus is the Gate—that he is the one who lets people in—and not them. But if you were listening closely he didn’t say “No one gets to *heaven* except through me,” he said, “No one comes to the *Father* except through me.” Once again, heaven is not a place but a person. Jesus is inviting us into life with the Father, into the “life of the ages,” and he is the way to that kind of life.

Once you get that into your head the rest of what he said that night becomes clear. He said, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” And that’s when Philip spoke up and said, “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said, “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?” I’ve been trying to think if there is another way I can put this to you and the best I can come up with is this: 1) that there is a Room called Relationship (as in, relationship with the Father); 2) that Jesus *is* that room; and 3) that he is inviting us to come in.

Why would he need to do that? Because some people still have such scary ideas about God that they need someone like Jesus to come to them, and love them, and reassure them that God is not like that at all. They need someone to hold open the door

of relationship and invite them in, and still they stand outside, wringing their hands and biting their nails. Jesus might say, “What are you so afraid of? The God you are about to meet is my Father, and I am his Son, and I am so much like him that if he were standing here instead of me you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between us. What he tells me to say, I say. What he tells me to do, I do. My words are his words. My works are his works. If you’ve seen me you’ve seen him and if you’ve loved me then you’re *really* going to love him.”

It all started to sound so good on that night, in that upper room, that if Jesus had said, “Let’s go!” I think we would have jumped up and gone with him right then. But that’s not what he said. He said, “I’m going to prepare a place for you, and when I get it ready I will come and get you, and take you to where I am, so that we can be there, together, forever.” Which meant that in the meantime we would be here, without him, temporarily.

Friends, I’m still here, although I never thought I would live this long, and you’re still here, although you might rather be there. So, what are we supposed to do with the time we have until then? Well, here’s what I think: I think we are supposed to tell people about the God revealed in Jesus. I don’t know how it is for you, but sometimes I find that people don’t want to believe in God because they are afraid of God, and if they can pretend that he doesn’t exist then they won’t have to be afraid. But here’s a better way: convince them that God is love and then they will begin to look for him everywhere. In the first chapter of my Gospel I remind my readers that no one has ever seen God: that it’s Jesus, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known. And this is what he has made known to them: that the Father’s heart beats with love; that they don’t have

to be afraid of him. I mean, he didn't give his Son because he hated the world; he gave his Son because he loved the world. He gave his Son because he wanted the people of the world to have life that is abundant, overflowing, and everlasting. We find that kind of life in relationship with God and we enter that relationship through Jesus, who has shown us the Father. He has shown us that we can love the Father and trust the Father. He has shown us that we have nothing to fear, because God is love.

So, there's Jesus—a Room called Relationship—holding open the door and begging us to come in. If we do, we may discover what he has known all along: that heaven is not a place; it's a person.

Thanks be to God.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2023