

Sunday, May 3, 2026
Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A)
1 Peter 2.2-10; John 14.1-14
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Embodying Eternal Life”

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Occasionally, someone will ask me: “So, what is heaven really like?” Presuming that, as a priest, I have some secret inside knowledge about such matters. No, we do not take a class in seminary that reveals hidden secrets. When we are ordained, we are not given a secret manual with the answers to the sacred mysteries. My response to that question is usually something along the lines of “We really don’t know. The only person to have come back from heaven didn’t give us any details.”

I think such questions about heaven are prompted in part by our natural curiosity about the unknown, and in part by such passages as our Gospel for today. After all, it starts off with Jesus saying, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Or, as in the King James Version, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” Even though I can only afford a two-bedroom apartment in this life—in Southern California, anyway—at least I will get a mansion for all eternity.

While today’s Gospel reading and the imagery of a heaven filled with McMansions for all sounds appealing, and while such imagery is intended to say something about our eternal life in God’s heavenly realm, one commentator cautions that it is not about “celestial real estate.” While certainly having implications for our eternal life, the broader intent of Jesus’ image of dwelling places for all is a metaphor for relationship with God and Christ in the broadest of terms.

Putting our Gospel reading into context will help see how this is the case. Jesus had already told his disciples several times that he would be put to death. Now they are in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. And for Jesus’ final days, for his Passion. The scene today is part of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. Immediately before our passage for today, Jesus reiterates what will happen, placing an element of finality upon this gathering: “I am with you only a little longer” (Jn 9.33). Naturally, the disciples are disoriented, distraught, devastated. And then, he foretells that Peter will deny and desert him. Begging the question, “What about the rest of us? Will we be faithful to the end?” Unspoken, although undoubtedly on their minds. Also raising all sorts of questions about what will happen to them when Jesus is gone.

To help answer these questions, Jesus begins what is referred to as his Farewell Discourse. A lengthy speech meant to prepare his disciples for life after he is gone, for life post-resurrection. Preparing them for the significance of the events they will witness over the next few days. It’s just that they do not know how significant. They can’t know, until they actually live through these events. They can’t know until they live with the realities yet to unfold. But, they will be able to look back with eyes of faith and begin to understand. Hopefully, aided by what he tells

them here and now, in this, the final meal they will share. Providing instructions to the disciples about how to live and to continue his ministry without his physical presence.

First and foremost, Jesus seeks to provide assurance to the disciples that just because he will be leaving them, that does not mean they will be abandoned. Just because he is leaving does not mean the end of their relationship. On the contrary, Jesus knows that his resurrection will ultimately provide the means to ongoing relationship. It may seem counterintuitive, but Jesus' departure will allow, will enable, believers to continue to be in relationship with him and to share in the intimate relationship Jesus has with God. With Jesus' own journey through death to life serving as a model for our own journey—using the imagery of our own journey from death to new life as a model for living here and now. Hence his opening image of “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.” Assurance that relationship does not end with his death, but through the power of the resurrection, is made eternal. Ongoing relationship with Jesus is not impeded by death—his or ours. Even though he will not be physically with them, with us, he will still be with them, and with us.

To illustrate this ongoing relationship, Jesus tells them “You know the way to the place where I am going.” Presumably meaning that because of their time together, they need not worry. They have what they need to continue on. They know how to continue on the way he has prepared for them. But the disciples are getting hung up on the afterlife image. Thomas gives voice to what they are all thinking: “How can we know the way?” While he seems to be thinking in geographic terms, what Jesus is talking about is not so much about physical geography, but rather spiritual geography, relational geography, even vocational geography. Where they need to go spiritually, relationally, and vocationally. All of which is contained in the nuances of today's Gospel passage.

As we are well aware, so much of what Jesus says and does contains multiple layers of meaning. We especially see that here. The outer layer first presented providing hope and assurance about the afterlife. The promise of eternal life provided through Jesus' death and resurrection. “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.” Below this image of dwelling places is another layer pointing to ongoing relationship with God and with Christ in God's heavenly realm. At the same time, if we peel back that layer, we find another layer of meaning about ongoing relationship. For if ongoing relationship in God's heavenly realm is assured, as Jesus promises here, the logical assumption is that eternal life with God and with Christ does not merely begin at the moment of our death, at the moment when we enter into the heavenly realm. Rather, that hope and promise, that assurance, of relationship is eternal, for all time, including when and where we are now. That assurance applies equally to where we are in our physical lives in this moment.

Unable to grasp Jesus' broader meaning, Thomas asks “How can we know the way?” And Philip requests, “Show us the Father.” Thomas, Philip, and the other disciples, are not able see what ongoing relationship will look like, to how that relationship will continue with Jesus' impending death.

Jesus' response of “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” addresses both Thomas' and Philip's inability to comprehend. Telling them that through him, through what he has taught them, through what they have witnessed over the last three years, they have seen the essence

of who he is, and therefore who God is. They have seen, whether they were able to recognize it or not, what John states in the Prologue to his Gospel, that he is the Word made flesh. He is God incarnate. Through him and what they have experienced firsthand, they are able to see and know God as never before. Not only that, their experience of God will not end with his death. Rather, through his death, through the resurrection to follow, they will experience him—God and Christ—in new ways. In more intimate ways. In ongoing ways. In ways that transcend physical relationship. In ways that will transcend life itself.

Admittedly, this is easier for us to comprehend—maybe? Sort of? After all, we have the benefit of two millennia of sorting out what this all means with the difference in perspective that affords. For Jesus' original followers, the God of Israel was unseen, transcending their physical existence. They were still trying to wrap their heads around this notion that Jesus was God in the flesh. That through him, they were able to see and know and experience God in ways they never had before. For us, two thousand years later and operating out of a solidly Christian context, all we have ever known is a Jesus who is the Son of God, God in the flesh. All we have ever known is the Risen Christ, who the disciples have yet to even encounter. We have grown up in the faith learning that in addition to experiencing God “out there” in the world, we know God most intimately through the Risen Christ, through his teachings, through his actions, through the ongoing relationship we have with him, through the ways God works in our own lives. This is something we take for granted. Which is, nonetheless, knowledge and experience that are built on what the disciples had to discover and experience for themselves. Knowledge and experience that have been passed down through the millennia through their witness and testimony. All beginning with the crash course Jesus was giving the disciples in his Farewell Discourse.

“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.” This is a commissioning of the disciples and all who come after them. That they are to go out and testify and bear witness to the power of God in Christ that they have experienced in their own lives. That the only way God's love will be made know and spread is by them demonstrating and sharing that love in tangible ways. Yes, Jesus may have been God in the flesh, but he was also but one man. Only able to directly touch a limited number of people in the three years of his public ministry. But through his disciples—those original remaining Eleven, those other unnamed followers, and each of us—his presence, his impact is able to be felt far beyond the little piece of land called Galilee and Judea, far beyond the three years that came and went two millennia ago. And Jesus hints that all of this is only made possible because he goes to the Father, where he can provide ongoing connection and relationship with us, through God who strengthens us, inspires us, and gives us the gifts and talents we need to serve as his hands and feet and heart in the world. That it is through us as the Body of Christ in the world that God's love continues to be revealed. All summed up in the “New Commandment” Jesus had just given his disciples: “Love one another; as I have love you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13.34). This is the greater work that Jesus speaks of. The greater work the disciples were called to. The greater work we are called to.

The disciples do eventually get the message, but only post-resurrection when they were able to experience the Risen Christ and to live into ongoing relationship with him. The remainder of the New Testament bears this out. Words that come down to us through the ages, providing us with insights that help us in our day as we seek to authentically live our ongoing relationship

with God and with Christ. This is what Peter is referring to in our Epistle reading for today. Using the ancient imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures of “the stone the builders rejected [becoming] the very head of the corner.” That precious stone that is the Risen Christ becoming the foundation of a community of faith. Through his resurrection, the community of those who follow him becoming a spiritual house built of living stones. Those who are a holy priesthood who bear witness to God’s love revealed through Christ’s resurrection, whereby we are granted eternal life. Eternal life that does not begin with our death, but which we live into as we seek to embody our ongoing relationship with God through the Risen Christ in our daily lives and ministries.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!