

THE WAY TO HEAVEN

John 14:1-14

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Series A)

May 7, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 14, verses 1 through 14. In this gospel lesson, Jesus reveals the way to heaven. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 14, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known 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 it is enough for us.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ 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 authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

¹² “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Katie, Ruby, A.J., and Joe,

You are weak. That might not be what you want to hear. You’re growing and learning. You’re getting stronger every day. Over the last two years, you’ve grown in your faith, or, at least, I think you have. You’ve learned a lot, not as much as I wish you would have, but so it is. You are still learning. I’m not ready for you to be done with confirmation, but that’s okay, because confirmation is not the end of anything. You’re still learning the Christian faith. But you now you start doing it the way your parents are, and you have good examples in them. They’re weak too, and I think they know that. That’s why they’re here.

We are all weak. This world is a dangerous place, and we are not strong enough for it. But here’s what you have going for you: you have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what you learned in the creed. The Father created you. He gave you every good thing you have. And he still protects you. His Son, Jesus Christ, is your Lord. He is true God and true man. He purchased

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you, “not with silver and gold, but with his holy and precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death” (*Small Catechism*, “Apostles’ Creed”). You belong to him. And you have the Holy Spirit. Through the Word of God and this sacrament you will soon receive, he preserves you in the true Christian faith.

These are the most important things in life. That’s because these things are not just for this life. They are for death, and they are for the life you will live after this one.

There are many things in this life that you might love. Some of them are good. Some of them are bad. But the most important things in this life are those things that will last into death and into the world to come.

The night before Jesus died, he explained to his disciples why he must die. He had told his disciples already that he would be crucified, and that he would rise again on the third day. But they did not understand what he was talking about, and they did not like it. And, again, they struggled to understand what Jesus was talking about. It became clear to them after everything happened. But even on the evening before his crucifixion, they only understood a little bit of what he said.

Jesus told them that he was going to prepare a place for them in his Father’s house. His “Father’s house” is a way of talking about heaven. The Bible also calls it the “new creation.” It’s the world we will live in after this one. Jesus prepared a place for them, and for all who trust in him, when he died on the cross.

Everybody wants to go to heaven. But the issue is, *how do we get there?* That’s what Jesus is talking about in this passage. He speaks of heaven as a house with many rooms, and he teaches us the Way there.

Now, when Jesus talks about heaven as his “**Father’s house**,” he doesn’t mean that it’s just a big building somewhere up in the clouds. Heaven is not just some place in the clouds; it’s a whole new world. His “**Father’s house**” means his entire property or estate. We talk this way sometimes. Maybe someone invites you over to their house, but you spend most of the time in the backyard. You’re still at their house, even if their house is a big estate out in the country. And when Jesus speaks of his “**Father’s house**,” he means everything that belongs to his Father. It’s heaven. It’s the new creation. It’s the world God’s children will live in after this one.

Jesus says he is going there in order to prepare a place for his disciples and for all who trust in him. So where was Jesus going? He was going to heaven. But the important part is how he got there.

When Jesus talks about going to heaven, we might think that he’s talking about his ascension, but he’s not. We’re coming up on Ascension Day in the Church calendar. It’s forty days after Easter. After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples over the course of forty days before he ascended into heaven (*Acts 1:3*). That is, he was lifted up into the clouds, and the disciples no longer saw him. But that’s not the event Jesus is talking about in this passage. Remember, this passage occurred the night before Jesus died. Jesus knew that he would rise from the dead on the third day, and the disciples still had those forty days in front of them. So Jesus is not talking about his ascension. Instead, he’s talking about going to the Father the very next day.

But why was Jesus going to the Father that day? And why did he have to die first? Jesus went to his Father, by way of the cross, to present his blood as the atonement for all sins. This was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. It’s similar to what the priests would do on the Day of Atonement.

We're going to hop in our way back Old Testament machine, because this goes back about 1,500 years before Jesus was sacrificed. During Old Testament times, there was one day every year when one priest would go into the holy of holies (Lev. 16). That was the really special part of the tabernacle. The tabernacle was like the temple, except it was a big tent instead of a stone building, and the Israelites used it for several hundred years before the temple was built. Well, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, a priest would go into this very special room. That's where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It was like the throne of God. Outside the tabernacle, before going in, the priest would sacrifice a bull. Then he would take some of the blood of the bull into the holy of holies and sprinkle it on the Ark of the Covenant. Then he would go back outside and sacrifice a goat, and he would do the same thing with the goat's blood. He carried some of it into the tabernacle, and into the holy of holies, and sprinkled it on the Ark of the Covenant. This was the only day in the entire year that anyone would go into the holy of holies. These sacrifices were for the sins of the people. But it was never really these sacrifices that took away sins. In reality, the sacrifices of bulls and goats looked forward to the sacrifice of Jesus, which does actually take away sins.

The book of Hebrews talks about this. The tabernacle on earth was a shadow of heaven (Heb. 8:1-2). The priests were a shadow of Jesus. And the bulls and goats were also a shadow of Jesus. In the true atonement, Jesus is both the victim and the priest. That is, he plays the part of the bulls and goats by being killed, and he plays the part of the priest, because he laid down his life willingly, and then he took his own blood and presented it in heaven (Heb. 9:11-12). And, apparently, there is a holy of holies in heaven, and there is something like the Ark of the Covenant in heaven, because the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle are copies of things in heaven (Heb. 8:1-2). It's not like God made things in heaven to match these things on earth. It's the other way around. God commanded Moses to construct things on earth that match the things in heaven. And Jesus entered that heavenly place to prepare a place for us in heaven.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). And several more times in chapters 14 and 16, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to the Father. He's going there to prepare a place for us. But it's not like the place needs to be constructed or decorated for us. We're talking about the God who speaks worlds into existence. He can just say the word, and the place is completed. His work was not in heaven, but on earth. Jesus prepared a place for us in heaven by purchasing the right for us to be there. And he purchased that right with "His holy and precious blood" (*Small Catechism*, "The Apostles' Creed;" 1 Peter 1:19). Jesus went to the Father by way of the cross. It's like what those priests in the Old Testament did with the sacrifices. Jesus sacrificed himself. Then he entered that place where no man had ever been allowed to go, and he presented his blood as the eternal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. This is what it means that Jesus went to his Father to prepare a place for us in his house.

His disciples did not understand this, at least not yet. Eventually they would, but not yet. So when Jesus said to them, "You know the way to where I am going," Thomas said what they must have all been thinking, "Lord, we don't even know where you're going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). They're legitimately confused. This would be like if your mom is walking out of the house, and she says, "Okay, I'm going now; you guys know the way." And you say, "Wait, what? Where are you even going?" That's how the disciples felt. Jesus told them that he is going to the Father, but they don't know where that is, so they don't think they know the way. But they

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do. They know the way, even though they don't know that they know the way. Because the way is not a road, it's not a list of directions, it's not a set of GPS coordinates. It's a person. Jesus is the way. That means he brings us there.

Sometimes people think of Jesus only as an example. But this is a very incomplete way of thinking about him. Now, Jesus is certainly a very good example. If we could all be more like him, that would be good. But we're going to fail. "Since the fall into sin, no man can perfectly keep the Law" (H.U. Sverdrup, *Explanation to Luther's Small Catechism*, 15). Being a Christian does not merely mean that we follow Jesus, because that's really impossible to do, especially if we intend to follow him to heaven. Jesus went to heaven by way of the cross. He took his blood and presented it before the Father. You and I cannot do that, and even if we could, it wouldn't be worth anything. This is a road that we cannot follow Jesus on. But we do travel that road, because Jesus is the way. The road is not the way. Jesus is the way. We do not follow him there, Jesus promised that he will come again and will take us there (14:3). So a Christian is not someone who follows Jesus; a Christian is someone who depends on Jesus.

It's like little children, who really like grandma and grandpa's house, and they really want to go there, but they don't know how to get there. They don't know the address. They don't know which roads to take. And they don't know how to drive the car. So they might say, "We don't know the way." But they do know the way, because, for them, the way is their mother or father, and they do know them.

That's how it is with us and Jesus. Everybody wants to go to heaven. But how do we get there? Where exactly is it? I can't tell you that. And what do you have to do in order to get there? I can sort of tell you that. We must perfectly keep the Law. But I can't tell you what all of that means. I can tell you what most of it means. But if perfection is the standard, and it is, we would need to perfectly understand every part of the Law. That, in itself, is impossible to do. But we have even less ability to actually keep it. So we might think that we don't know the way to heaven. We don't know where it is. We don't know how to get there. And even if we did, we don't have the ability to get there. And that's the biggest problem. We might feel like Thomas, saying, "We don't even know where you're going. How can we know the way?" But we do know the way.

Katie, Ruby, A.J., Joe, you do know the way. His name is Jesus, and you know him. He is your Savior. He shed his blood for you. He prepared a place in heaven for you. He rose from the dead, so that you will also rise. And he is coming again for you, so that where he is now, you will also be. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.