**SERMON FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, (YR. A)**

**Delaware-Maryland Synod, ELCA – Online Worship**

**May 10, 2020 + John 14.1-14**

Beloved: grace, mercy and peace be yours and mine from God and our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today’s gospel is one of the most beloved readings that we often hear at funerals. *Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me.* And one of the reasons it has become so beloved is the picture it paints of our life with God after this one, *In my Father’s house there are many mansions, many rooms, many dwelling places; were it not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? I will come again, and take you to myself, that where I am you also will be.* We can’t help but allow our minds to imagine streets of gold and pristine dazzling robes, and our grieving hearts are less troubled, our faith renewed.

Still, what we miss that this is but one image the scripture paints of an eternal home. And, our myopic vision of heaven can have disastrous consequences for how we understand life here and now, as well as the plight of our neighbor.

Today, I am thinking much about those members of my family who emigrated from places like Germany, Ireland and Italy, how their vision of heaven wasn’t confined to the great beyond, but anticipated in the here and now. Heaven was opportunity. Heaven was the mere chance for a better life. Heaven was the privilege of starting over, pursuing the dream and making a better life for one’s children and family. To listen to my own grandfather talk, he knew something of heaven before he ever died. And yet too often, such heavenly hopes are dashed whether by paralyzed political processes, simple ignorance of the plight of our neighbor, or worse still, the raging fear that the presence of others will change us at our core. Indeed, heaven denied.

In our gospel, Jesus makes a number of promises to his followers. In particular, he assures them that though he will soon depart from their midst, he will not therefore be abandoning them. There is a great home and a place has been prepared just for you. Come, you know the way.

And when the disciples share our utter confusion about what this could possibly mean, Jesus speaks these powerful words of deep and abiding truth: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

Too often, we have wielded Jesus’ word of assurance as an exclusionary warning. Believe in Jesus or else. There is only one path that leads to eternal life, only one gate that will open to the fabulous abode God has prepared for you. But, in the context of the whole of our gospel reading; laid against the larger narrative of God’s redeeming love in Jesus Christ, I read this as a word not only of hopefulness for the life to come, but as a promise for today. The picture Jesus draws here is not just about a future place of welcome, a heavenly home ready to welcome us when we die. Instead, he imagines a home that welcomes us both now and then.

These days after Easter are a powerful reminder that the resurrection is not a savings bond gaining interest toward some future reality, but a daily experience. Resurrection is not just something we anticipate but something in which we can participate now, even as pandemic, fear – and even death itself encroaches upon us from every side.

When we defer God's gift and promise of heaven to some indistinct, yet certain future day, we neglect to see how that gift might take root in our midst today. Heaven is not some saccharine comfort for the living of uncertain days, nor is it a sedative to bear the pain and burdens we bear in this damaged and hurting world; Heaven is Jesus’ promise intended to spur us into action right here and right now because God is already calling forth resurrection among, and through us. Because our lives are safe in the heart of God, we can risk anything, *everything*, out of love for God and neighbor.

Today, as I think of how heaven breaks into these perilous times, I am reminded of how the generosity of this church is supporting ministries like the Red Shed Village, a ministry of the North Avenue Mission led by Vicar Atticus Zavaletta. Embodying the missionary spirit of being church in adaptive and new ways, when the pandemic began to come close, the folks of the North Avenue Mission sprang into action, quickly working with community partners and church folks to accompany our unhoused neighbors who don’t have secure ways to isolate, or wash their hands with hot, soapy water for 20 seconds. Rather than run away from the fire that threatened to consume these nameless, faceless siblings; Vicar Atticus ran toward the fire and invited us to bring tents, food, sanitation and hope – that we would know in these neighbors, the very face of God. In that community, death is being swallowed up in resurrection, fear gives way to hope, and the kin-dom we share in Christ comes near. Heaven, albeit fragile, lived out.

The cross stands empty in testimony that the death Jesus conquered was even more powerful than the lack of humanity that sought to sweep away his life, the lack of humanity that continues to infect the hearts of a sin-sick and wounded world. Conquered death includes that death that insidiously works its way into our bones and worse, our spirits; conquered death includes the death that wields disease in its right hand, destruction in its left; the death that tears families apart; that death which stirs in us jealousies and hatreds; that death which wrekes havoc on the creation; that death which whispers in our hearts, "Crucify *him*" or "Fear *them;*" the death which distracts us from the pain of others; that death which convinces us that we and our neighbors, near and far, are not worthy of enduring love and abundant life.

On this side of the cross, we know that because Jesus has conquered death, we too are victorious, not just on that day when we die; but right here, right now.

*Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God,* and believe in the Christ who has named and claimed us, dear church, to love – even in the midst of our real fears and so much still unknown, to expose the culture of death for what it is – defeated, and work together that for us, and more so for our neighbor, it should be, as Jesus promises it will be, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

*The Rev. William (Bill) Gohl, Jr., Bishop*

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