

How can we know the way?
John 14:1-14, Easter 5, Year A
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My grandmother never forgot the hymns. She forgot everything else. What made us first notice her dementia was that she began to forget she'd bought tuna fish. She would go to the grocery store convinced that she and my grandfather were all out, and she would fill her basket with little circular cans. Eventually, every cabinet in the kitchen was packed tightly full, top to bottom, with green and blue columns of Starkist. As her Alzheimer's progressed, she forgot me. Then she did forget my mother. Then she did not recognize my grandfather, her own husband. Finally, she would look confusedly at the fork of food brought to her lips by another, lost even to the idea of food. It was as if she'd lost her entire way in life. But launch into "Guide me, O thou Great Jehovah," and she would sing. The tune and words would well up from somewhere deep within her, and in her weak warble alto voice she would join in the chorus. Even to the end, in the hymns she could find her way.

In today's Gospel, Jesus prepares the disciples for the time when he will be with them bodily no more. His words begin with a clear message of hope, one that is so comforting that this has become a favorite passage for funerals. Jesus says to his followers, "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 to 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."

But then Jesus adds, "*And you know the place where I am going.*"

Do we? Jesus' words of comfort appear to be qualified by a confidence he has in us that we may not share. The apostle Thomas, who can always be counted on to listen most closely, catches Jesus' inference, and he interrupts in creeping desperation, "Wait a minute, we *don't* know where you're going. How can we know the way?" It's been difficult enough to follow Jesus in the flesh. How, Thomas wonders, is he to follow along an unmarked path?

We can, I believe, understand Thomas' plaintive cry. Our lives are like obstacle courses, impeded and pocked with economic pressures, family commitments, political spin, cultural prejudices, and our own internal aching desires. There are more false markers and wrong turns

than we can count. How are we to know the way to the place—to the life—Christ prepares for us? Though some might pretend otherwise, *much* of the time we are like Thomas: fumbling doubters whose relationship with God is confused and confusing. We all experience moments when we cry, “How can we know the way?”

Jesus’ answer in today’s passage may actually amplify our self-doubt and our fear of being lost to God. In response to Thomas, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” It sounds so exclusive. One image that comes to mind is of Jesus as the great cosmic sentry, standing at the entrance to eternal life, opening the door only ever so slightly as he glowers at the line in front of him.

The anxieties that inform our reading of this passage and others like it arise from a culture obsessed with contractual relationships that define who’s in and who’s out, and the salvation often presented to us is described like a contract into which we enter: If we will say the right words or do the right thing, then our promised return is eternal bliss when our days are over. “Just accept Jesus,” we have heard, or “just be baptized” and the deal is signed. There is a simplicity to it, and our culture is surely *also* obsessed with simplifying things to the lowest possible denominator. But it is also such a dry and lifeless understanding of faith—and one to which all kinds of Christians are prone—that it is no wonder we still harbor secret anxieties, as if there must be more to the Way of Jesus than that.

There is. The Jesus who John presents to us is not the cosmic dealmaker. John presents a Jesus in whom the presence of God flows so fully that God and Christ are *One*. Jesus himself says, “I am *in the Father* and the Father *is in me*.” In other words, the very power that creates all things and holds them together in existence *moves in and through Jesus* so fully and transparently that when one looks upon Jesus it is God that one sees.

And throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus makes the radical promise—no less radical to our ears today than it was in the first century—that as God is in him, God can be in us. *God can dwell in us* and *we can dwell in God*. This is what Jesus is talking about when he says that he prepares a place for us—a dwelling place—in God. He’s not speaking primarily of heaven—although we have that promise, too. He is saying that the same presence of God that he experiences himself can flow through us. Because of Jesus, even in us the seam between God and man can become transparent.

This is the *Way*! As Gail O'Day says, is it not "the route to somewhere else, but...an expression of the faithful person's unity with God." It sounds mystical and esoteric. We may prefer a simpler explanation. We might *prefer* the kind of belief that simply allows us to sign the contract, to check a box in the affirmative instead of allowing an *indwelling* that could radically change who we are. But this is the *truth* that Jesus embodies. This is the *life* to which we are called, to be *moved* and made different by the God living within us and in whom we live.

Surely, there are things that we will say and do along the Way—such as professing our faith and receiving the Sacraments—but we must not mistake these as the Way itself. Rather, the Way of Jesus is nothing less than being permeated with the presence of God in our lives as Jesus is permeated by God in his. *This* is the gift Jesus gives us. *This* is the truth and the life.

It is a profound gift, so profound that the idea of it may leave us scratching our heads. I mean, what would the experience be like for God and me—or God and you—to dwell within one another? The best analogy may be our experience of music. I remember the first time I heard Mozart. I was a young teenager bored almost to tears as the movie "Amadeus" plodded (it seemed to me) across a big screen. But then, toward the end of the film, Mozart's requiem mass began to play, and I was captivated. The music seemed to reach out from the screen and move into and through me. It seemed to draw me out of that dim movie house and into an experience so much richer that I couldn't describe it then and I scarcely can now.

You know that experience, whether your musical tastes are Mozart, the Mamas & the Papas, or Maroon Five. The analogy between the way we become one with music that touches us—the way music can enter us and take us to a new place—and the way that God does the same is why music is so much a part of our worship, whether we're talking about the traditional and elegant music of Sunday mornings or the earthier settings of the Gathering. Now take this a step further. I had a college music professor who had a rare condition in which his sensory perception was heightened in such a way that he experienced music with all of his senses. When he *heard* compelling music, he *saw* a tapestry of colors before his eyes; he *tasted* sweet and salt. Music moved through all of him. On a deep level, he *knew* the music and was in union with it. It is not too much to say that Jesus' life is the Father's song, and if all our senses will be moved by *that* music, then we *will* know God.

When the obstacle course that is our lives draws us further away from God, this is what we must recall. Lest we fear, like Thomas, that we don't know the way, we must remember that

Jesus seeks not to confound us by requiring just the right words from us or just the right things we must do. He opens to us his very self, which is infused with the presence of God, and he invites us to be *moved*.

In what way *is* the Way exclusive? Only in this: We either open our lives to God, dwelling in him and him in us, or we don't. There is no way around that reality. But to anyone who does—*anyone* open to the music of God revealed in Jesus, eternal life becomes real, and not just at death, but at the very moment we begin to sing.

In the end, my grandmother's life was more darkness than light. But she never forgot the hymns. She couldn't verbalize a creed or a prayer. She couldn't take the Sacrament from danger of choking. But she could still sing.

***Guide me, O thou Great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty; move me with thy powerful hand;
Songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee,
I will ever give to thee.***

Though she lost all else, the song of God, made known to her through Jesus, she never lost in her life. She knew the Way. And *we* know the way. Let fear subside. Let anxieties cease. God seeks not to confound or confuse. He intends not for *any* to be lost. Only be moved by his presence. Be moved so that you and God are as one. *Amen*.