

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter 2014
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Alleluia! Christ is risen!

I have preached on today's gospel lesson, many, many times, but, as the song goes, "never on a Sunday." This reading from John's gospel is a favorite at funerals, and it has offered comfort to many.

In the reading, Jesus tells his followers not to worry, because God's house has lots of dwelling places, and they already know how to find them. Many of you may remember the traditional version of this reading, which has Jesus saying, "In my Father's house there are many mansions." That's a pretty strange image. Even in the newer translation it's hard to imagine. A house full of houses.

A weird idea, but one that sets the imagination spinning.

What does Jesus mean? What would such a place look like? What would it be like to live in a place like that? Wouldn't you get lost? And just how big is God's key ring, anyway?

I have to say that in my childhood, I thought I understood it perfectly well. My great-grandmother lived in just that kind of a house. Two houses, really, with a huge common back yard – big four-story Edwardian houses that my great-grandfather built, the newer one occupied by Nana, and the older one then belonging to her oldest daughter, my great-aunt Alice and her family. When we

gathered at Nana's house for Thanksgiving or Mothers' Day, both houses were filled with running, laughing children, prankster older cousins, scores of aunts and uncles, and, of course, mountains of food. For Thanksgiving and Christmas, the pocket doors that connected the two parlors and the dining room were opened so that one long table could run through the house. For Mothers' Day an even longer table nearly seventy feet long was set up spanning the double backyard, so that we could all sit down together.

So to me, my great-grandmother's house was a house with, if not many mansions, at least two, and it was a great comfort to me to hear Jesus say that heaven was like Nana's house, because, of course, why wouldn't it be, if anyone wanted to go there.

Well, I've been to seminary now, and have learned to put away childish things, and a lot of things I was sure were true about God when I was younger I understand were wrong. But I don't think I was wrong about Nana's house. I think heaven is a lot like that, only with more houses, more laughing children, more welcoming relatives, and, of course, more and better food.

But I'm pretty sure that Jesus, in telling us about God's house, is trying to tell us something not just about heaven, but about the here and now. For I believe that some of those homes that are part of God's house are not in heaven, but here on earth. When you find real welcome, when you are received and fed and loved by

friends or family as though their home were your home, when you are served by someone truly kind and generous, then you have found yourself in one of those many mansions that are part of God's house, just as much as the heavenly ones where Jesus will welcome us when we die.

So the truth is, like Thomas, we already have a pretty good idea about what it would be like to live in a place like that, and how to get there, although we may not realize it. Neighborhoods where the kids treat all of the houses as second homes.

Homes where there is always something to eat. Families that grow by including anyone who wants to be included no matter the genetic relationship. Churches where each member's home extends the hospitality and welcome of the whole community. All of these are not just signs, but actual parts of God's household.

This church, the house we dwell in right now has many mansions, and it is because we already know what that is like that we will recognize the welcome we receive when we meet our final rest.

But the way, the truth and the life that Jesus calls us to is something much more than that.

In Verna Dozier's marvelous book *The Dream of God*, she points out that Jesus never sought worshippers, only followers. Over and over again, he asks the people he encounters to follow him, and he tells his followers that they will, in walking his way, do greater things than Jesus himself. If Jesus is to be our way, we must walk

the path that he walked, welcoming outcasts, standing up to secular power and to the leaders of our own religious community when they fall short of the ideals of the reign of God: healing, feeding, forgiving, and loving all, no matter how unlovely they may seem to us.

If Jesus is to be our truth, we must both believe and believe in Jesus. Sometimes it is easier to do one than the other. In the Nicene Creed that we will say together after the sermon, we profess that we believe IN one Lord, Jesus Christ, and we rattle off a list of assertions about his history and his nature. Some of those assertions can be difficult to swallow, and indeed are in the creed because they have been and continued to be points of contention among what we, perhaps wishfully sometimes, call ‘believers.’ But if Jesus is our truth, we must do more than believe IN him – that he lived and died and rose, that he could accomplish what he purposed – we must also believe him, what he taught and what he proclaimed. And that can also be hard to do, because Jesus sometimes said pretty difficult things to believe. Love your enemies. Sell all that you have and give the money to the poor and follow me. Your sins are forgiven. Perhaps hardest of all to believe: God loves you.

And if Jesus is to be our life, then we must embrace life not as we know it, but as Jesus lived it – a life of abundance, not scarcity; of love, not taking offence; of fearlessness, not anxiety. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God,

believe also in me,” Jesus says at the beginning of today’s lesson. And throughout the Gospels Jesus is continually telling his followers not to be afraid, not to be anxious, not to let their hearts be troubled. Why? Because it is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Because Jesus is with you, even to the end of time. Because with God all things are possible. Because God so loves you that God gave his only child that you may have eternal life. Because Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and in knowing Jesus, we know God, and know the way to God, and know the truth of God, and share in the life of God.

For which we say,

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Amen.