

## “Place, Way, Relationship”

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Script: John 14:1-14

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“Troubled hearts.” The disciples knew what Jesus meant by “troubled hearts.” In an odd twist, it was Jesus who was comforting the disciples as they shared his final supper. They faced the loss of their leader and wondered how they were going to face it all. They all knew that it was going to end badly for him soon.

We know what it is like to have troubled hearts as we confront the reality of death—this morning I received word that my best friend’s father passed away— but we also have other reasons to have troubled hearts.

I’ve never done this before, but I am going to share with you something of my wife Linda’s story. As many of you know, she has a progressive neurological disease that slowly is taking away her body called Machado Joseph disease. She inherited the gene for this condition through her father. Most days she gets around very well and feels good. Other days— not so good... walking is difficult to manage and the numbness in her legs, feet, and hands make the usual tasks of the day take longer and require twice as much effort.

One evening last week I got home and since it was one of those beautiful spring evenings, we decided to go for a walk, and so we started. Linda’s walking became more and more labored... more and more clumsy and effort-full. We decided to cut the walk short due to the pain and frustration of it all.

Back at the house the tears spoke of the grief of envying someone who can walk without effort,

the tears spoke of the questioning of *why?*

and the pain of not being able to complete a simple walk around the block.

Troubled hearts. Hers’ isn’t the only one to be sure. On some level, every heart here in this room is in some trouble that may or may not have something to do with death.

Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” and his answer to troubled hearts is belief. The original Greek puts it literally “You believe in God [already].”

Believe in also in me.” Well, Linda is a believer... you and I are believers, that is why we are here. We are believers— at least on our better days, if we are honest. And believing *in* him is not the same as believing in things *about* him, such as that he was born of a virgin or raised Lazarus from the dead. Instead, it is a matter of giving our hearts to him, of betting the farm on him when the chips are down, the way a child believes in a mother or a father... the way a mother or father believes in a child.<sup>i</sup>

At the Last Supper, with a troubled heart Peter asked Jesus where he was going. Where was he going after the Romans and the religious leaders string him up on a cross and cross him out? Jesus told him where he was going: “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places...I go to prepare a place for you...that where I am you may be also.” To their troubled hearts, Jesus tells them there is more light beyond the darkness of this world... beyond the darkness of death. This is Good News to be sure, especially when we *are* troubled by death... our own or of loved ones, and that is why we so often use this Scripture for funeral services.

Henri Nouwen, relates a marvelous parable about the limits of our understanding the mysteries that lay beyond. He imagines two twins — a brother and sister — talking to each other in their mother's womb: The sister said to the brother, "I believe there is life after birth." Her brother protests vehemently. *"No, no! This is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but cling to the cord that feeds us."* The little girl insisted: "There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move." But still, she couldn't convince her twin.

After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, "I have something else to say, and I'm afraid you won't believe that, either, but I think there is a mother."

Her brother became furious. *"A mother!"* he shouted. *"What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? I already told you, this place is all we have. Why do you always want more? This is not such a bad place. We have all we need. Let's just be content."*

The sister was quite overwhelmed by her brother's response and for a while, she didn't dare to say anything more. But she couldn't let go of her thoughts and since she only had her twin brother to speak to, she finally said, "Don't you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful."

"Yes," he answered. *"What's special about that?"*

"Well," said the sister, "I think these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don't you think that's exciting?"

The brother turned away. He was fed up with this foolish talk of his sister and felt that the best thing to do would be to simply ignore her and hope that she would stop talking about it. <sup>ii</sup>

The apostle Paul maintained that the whole of creation was in labor, groaning for its delivery, awaiting new life, and that the sufferings, troubles, and trials we endure here are not only not worth comparing to the coming light and joy, but also part of our soul work to get there (Romans 8:18-25).

So how do we get there? "How can we know the way?" is the way Thomas put it. To that Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." He does not say that the church is the way. He does not say that his teachings are the way, or what people have taught about him for centuries— creeds & doctrines. He does not say religion is the way, not even the religion that bears his name. He says that he himself is the way.

So all this is good news as we are troubled by death. It is good news as we await our own birth into another life beyond... but what if our hearts are troubled for other reasons? What if our hearts are troubled by not being able to walk around the block... by losing your job...addictions, conflicts or broken relationships with loved ones...a son or daughter who finds themselves in Iraq or Afghanistan? "*How can we know we know the way*" through our current squeezing and labor episodes?

A whole new level of understanding this passage and the Christian life itself was given me a couple of years ago. I was leading a Bible Study looking at John's Gospel, pondering this passage. Normally I come prepared for class... background researched, sources checked, current thought reviewed, but this particular day I wasn't. I was flying by the seat of my pants, and somehow I wound up reading part of a commentary on this passage out-loud. As I read it I nearly fell off my chair in astonishment.

"In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you..." The commentary stated that the phrase "my Father's house" was not a synonym for heaven. John's Gospel, being one of the most non-literal documents ever, has Jesus use images and metaphors often to speak of spiritual realities. "Dwelling places" or "rooms" has nothing to do with location (i.e., heaven), and has rather to

do with relationship. Location or rooms are symbols for relationship. It speaks of Jesus' relationship with God and now our relationship with God through Christ.

Jesus is saying in other words, to his friends the night of his last supper, "My return to God will make it possible for you to join in the relationship that the Father and I share."

Another way of putting it is that Jesus' life, death and Resurrection makes available a whole new way of relating & connecting with God! Christ gives us a whole new way of accessing God!

A final way of saying this is to point out that there are many dimensions of reality within God... the doctrine of the Trinity is a hint at this truth, and that as Christians we have this specific access and relationship with God as Abba-Father.

Jesus is preparing a place for us, not in heaven so to speak, but within God himself! Jesus is preparing a whole new way of connecting with God that was not available before. Radical Stuff! The "many rooms/dwelling places" within God's house are relationships that we can have with God. One of them is the uniquely Christian relationship only available through Christ, and is characterized by Communion. "I and the father are one." We can share in that Abba-Father type of relationship, not only after we die, but now!

After digesting this I found the passage means much more than it meant to me before. It is not just about heaven, after we die, but about having an intimate relationship with God now that will continue through death. Those twins in the womb already have a relationship with their mother...a relationship of communion that will mature and expand after birth into a whole new world.

An intimate relationship with God now (a dwelling place). The morning following Linda's bad day of pain (both emotional and physical), she awoke and lay in the silence that is that part of the day before it begins. As she lay there looking at the ceiling, she heard a voice. A voice she didn't recognize. A clear voice... that said, "I'm sorry." That's all it said. No visions, no explanations, no resolutions. "I'm sorry." The voice said "I'm sorry" in that way we all say 'I'm sorry' when something bad happens to another one we love deeply, even though we've done nothing to cause it whatsoever.

Now what do you make of this?

You could take it at face value and say that God set aside the normal rules and showed up in a voice to Linda, expressing love and compassion.

You could say that for whatever reason Linda was more receptive to hear the voice of the sacred that continually speaks love and mercy.

You could say that it was the spirit of her father coming across the veil... speaking those words of apology even though he had nothing to do with causing Linda's disease.

You could say that the voice was simply parts of Linda's psyche or soul speaking words of sorrow and compassion to other parts of her soul. Who knows? Who can ever know anything for sure about the mystery of things?

"I'm sorry." It is not an answer to a troubled heart exactly. Certainly didn't fix anything, but it does sound like what a father or mother would say to a child who is encountering the pain that comes with life itself. It sounds like an expression of those in an intimate relationship of communion. When we hear the words *I'm sorry* in that way it lets us know we are not alone, and that their heart goes out to us.

"Believe also in me" he said. It means to give our hearts to Christ. I'm beginning to learn that he returns the favor. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Bidding Farewell*, The Christian Century, April 4, 2006, pp. 26-31.

<sup>ii</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying & Caring*, Harper, San Francisco, 1994, p. 19-20.