

‘Where I Am...’
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John 14:1-14
May 22, 2011

I was with May, Kiran Sigmon’s sister and my Swan Mountain Farm neighbor, at the French Broad Chocolate Lounge a few minutes after 6:00 last night. We had just dropped off her daughter Ella at the Beebe Theater, for a dance performance that we were going to see a bit later. The Buys family, having left Katie at the same place, all filed in the door.

May had just announced to me that it was after 6:00 and we were all still here—that the “rhapsody” hadn’t come. (I’m coaching her in theological terms, but they haven’t all sunk in yet). I was not the least bit surprised, though I confess to being slightly disappointed. And I did have the thought that if the end of the world was coming, I’d definitely want to spend my last moments on earth at the French Broad Chocolate Lounge.

I’m guessing that predictions about Christ’s Second Coming have been around since, oh, probably the moment he was carried up into the clouds at the Ascension, not long after his Resurrection. Reactions to it have ranged from the iconic, bearded, long-haired man on a street corner holding a sign proclaiming “The End Is Near,” to the recent effort involving billboards, Twitter feeds, and people in matching T-shirts and RVs fanning out across the country to pronounce that yesterday was the day.

Even NPR considered it a news story, so you know it must be important. I went to sleep last night feeling sadness for those who had believed so strongly—including a young couple with a 2-year-old and another child on the way, who told their story on yesterday morning’s “Weekend Edition.” Like many other people, they had quit their jobs and sold their home in preparation for the Rapture.

I’ve spent a little time the last few days pondering this phenomenon. What drives this belief that pops up from time to time with such passion and strength? I can only conclude that when life feels shaky and uncertain, it’s comforting to have something certain to believe in. When life feels fearful and difficult, it’s a relief to picture oneself leaving it all behind and flying into heaven and the welcoming arms of Jesus.

As many commentators have pointed out in recent days, the Bible states clearly, in the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, that not even Jesus or the angels know when he will return. No mathematical calculations based on the flood of Noah’s era, or any other event, will reveal the date. Jesus will come, scripture says, at an “unexpected hour.” And it exhorts us, therefore, to be always ready.

It may be just a coincidence, but the Gospel lesson in today’s lectionary is Jesus’ announcement to his disciples of his return. The setting is the night before his arrest and crucifixion. He has just shared his last supper with his friends. He has girded himself with a towel, poured water into a basin, and washed their feet. And he has announced that one will betray him and another deny him as he faces the agony ahead.

Biblical commentators refer to the 13th through 17th chapters of John’s Gospel, from which our passage comes, as Jesus’ “farewell discourse.” It’s a very long good-bye speech to his most beloved friends. Jesus is preparing them for his departure and for life in his absence.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he says, just moments after making clear what troubling events lie just ahead. He tells them that in God’s house, there are many dwelling places, according to my New Revised Standard Version. I grew up hearing the King James Version, with its promise of many mansions. “If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and 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.”

I imagine that these words felt both comforting and confusing to Jesus’ followers. Thomas, in typical disciple fashion, requests something akin to a divine GPS. “How can we know the way?” he asks. Here,

there's a little of the comedy that often gets missed by modern readers but is present throughout the gospels, as Jesus tries over and over to make things plain and his followers persist in not getting it. I imagine God up there in the heavens proclaiming again and again, "Recalculating."

Philip joins the misunderstanding and chimes in: "Just show us the Abba, and we'll be satisfied." You can feel the tension and frustration in Jesus' response: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?" Don't you get that when you're looking at me, you *are* seeing the Abba? Don't you get that we're one and the same? How discouraging to know that Jesus is coming to the end of his earthly existence and his closest friends still don't really understand who he is or what he's about.

I'm grateful for the Gospel of John. It's lyrical, eloquent, mystical. The other three gospels are known as the "synoptics," meaning that they follow the story of Jesus pretty closely and resemble one another in their narrative thread. John, like any good poet, adds his own flourishes and emphasizes the parts of the story that he finds most important. Only he writes down the farewell discourse. And I'm thankful that he did.

Otherwise, we might get the sense that Jesus left his disciples without much of a goodbye and little preparation for a future without him. John lets us know that Jesus didn't just get beamed up into heaven at the Ascension without warning. He took great care with his leave-taking.

I think there's a lesson here for the church, and for us at Circle of Mercy. One of the things I love most about this Circle is that we pay attention to comings and goings. I think back two years ago to the Sunday when we blessed Susanne, Greg, Caleb, and Ascher Walker Wilson for your service in Colombia with Mennonite Central Committee. And I know that a lot of thought has been going on in many corners about how to welcome you back sensitively, giving you space to just be here tonight in a low-key way, with anticipation of all the ways we'll engage and learn from you in the months ahead.

Prayer, ritual, music, gifts, hugs have become part of our receiving and letting go. I'm particularly grateful for our ritual of inviting those going on short- or long-term journeys to sit behind the communion table and receive the blessings of the whole congregation; for welcoming babies and new members in a manner that lets everyone lay on a hand and say a word; for the many times we've circled around those celebrating a triumph or facing a difficulty.

We still have some things to learn about this—especially, I think, in how we broaden the Circle to welcome new people, and how we let go of people who have journeyed with us for a while and have decided to move on. The latter, in my experience, is particularly difficult for congregations and communities.

Circle of Mercy does not claim, or aspire, to be *the* church for everyone. Many other wonderful communities of faith exist, and we know that not everybody is going to feel at home here. Still, it's difficult when someone who has been with us for a while chooses to leave, because we take our covenant with one another seriously, and we feel the break when someone leaves it. Each departure affects the whole Circle. I take it as a sign of health that this is true. Otherwise, our covenant and connection don't mean much.

I've been particularly grateful when leave-taking happens with honest communication to the entire Circle, and with space opened for us to bless the person moving on. This avoids a great deal of second-guessing and hurt, and enriches the whole Circle as we seek to be followers of Jesus, who modeled forgiveness and reconciliation, and took great care to prepare his disciples for change.

There's a verse in tonight's gospel passage that stopped me short. It's the 12th: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." I have a hard time believing that Jesus actually meant that his followers would do greater works than he did. It seems heretical even to think it.

My New Revised Standard Version Bible has an interesting footnote about this verse. It says, "Believers are Jesus' successors, and Jesus 'returns' through their work."

I don't actually know if Jesus is going to return someday on a cloud and sweep up all the believers into heaven at the Rapture. What I think this verse is telling us is that, in the grand scheme of things, it really shouldn't matter. We are called to believe, not so that at the end time we can be sure to make it to heaven, but so that on a daily basis we can commit ourselves to making change on earth.

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To live always ready for the "unexpected hour" of Jesus' return means to strive, in every moment, to live the way he did: honestly and confessionally, doing the works of mercy and justice. You've probably seen the bumper sticker that reads, "Jesus is Coming. Look Busy." It's a somewhat cynical take on the Rapture. But I think the point for those of us who are believers is that there is indeed plenty to do on behalf of the realm of God. And whether Jesus returns tomorrow or in the next millennium doesn't ultimately matter, because he's already here in the lives of those of us who claim his name.

Jesus is inviting us into the same relationship that he has with the Abba. We are in God, and God is in us, abiding in one another. I love that word *abide*. It connotes permanence, a bond that cannot be broken.

In the passage that follows ours tonight, Jesus makes this promise to his followers: "I will not leave you orphaned." As a recent orphan myself, I find this to be an extremely comforting word. Jesus is letting his beloveds know that, even when he is physically absent, he and God are there. He assures them that they will have an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will be as close to them as Jesus was when he walked the earth.

Indeed, when life feels shaky and uncertain, it's comforting to have something certain to believe in. I'm staking my life on this: "Where I am, there you may be also."

Amen.