



JOHN 14:1-6 | How can we know the way to heaven?

Wednesday, May 13, 2015 — *The Vigil of the Ascension of our Lord*

¹ “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

How can we know the way to heaven? Isn’t this the central truth to every human’s sinful heart? How can I be saved? What awaits me after death? How can I reconcile myself before “god”? And it’s such an important question to ask. It’s important because every person knows that they fall short in some way to the perfection that God demands. Every person knows that they have, at some point in their life, wronged someone else or did something that was morally abhorrent. And so many people lie awake at night, staring at the whirring ceiling fan as they wonder, “How can I get to heaven?”

You know, Thomas had the same concerns. The question that he poses to Jesus is exactly the same question that millions of people—perhaps you, too—have asked. “How can we know the way?” What’s interesting here is the way Thomas phrased it. For that, you’ll need to know what the Greek said. Thomas really said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can I gain the capacity to know where you are going?” And even that English translation limps. The Greek word Thomas uses is similar to the idea for our English word, dynamite—power, capability, capacity, ability. Thomas wanted to know how he himself could find the capacity to go to heaven. And thus the problem. He couldn’t. Neither can you. And neither can I. Because of our sin, we have been removed from God’s presence. And this isn’t someone else’s fault. We can’t shift the blame. We’ve chosen the path of rebellion. And because of it, like Thomas, we are still left with the simple, heart-wrenching question: **How can we know the way to heaven?** But Jesus has the answer for us today. “Follow me from the cross,” he says. “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”

That’s definitely easier said than done. Think of the past 40 days in the disciples’ lives. Just over one month before this day, they had been huddled in a room somewhere in Jerusalem fearing for their lives. All hope had been lost. Their teacher and Lord was dead. And they were afraid that they would be next. To make matters worse, the body of their friend was gone. Some suspected that it was stolen; others still held out hope that he could be alive. Nonetheless, the extenuating

circumstances of these disciples showed that their view of Jesus was clouded. He hadn't fulfilled what they had thought he would fulfill. He hadn't freed them from those evil Romans. The pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday had barely lasted a few days. In fact, in the past week, Jesus made even more enemies as he spoke out against the teachers and the priests. And now hope was gone. The situation was too dire to have anything be done. And they lost all focus on the cross.

But Jesus wouldn't let them sit in their pity and unbelief. He appears to them again and again. He reminds them of peace again and again. He shows himself alive again and again. And he points them back to his work at Calvary once more. It wasn't hard for him to do. We heard in our Gospel lesson this evening that he pointed them back to the Scriptures. "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled... Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed..." (Luke 24:44,46-47)

This wasn't rocket science. As Jews they would have heard over and over again as young children and adults these promises of God through Scripture. And Jesus encourages them, "Trust in God; trust in me!" All of this was done so that you may have life. All of this was done so that you may proclaim life. Follow me. Trust in me. Believe in me.

And he says the same to you. I'm sure God hasn't done what you have wanted him to do for you. I'm sure your prayers have been riddled with requests from him about finances and mortgages and family and friends. And yet, how many of those requests seem to go unanswered? How many of you continue to sit in debt despite your fruitful and faithful offerings every week? How many of you continue to fight with family and friends about the sins they're living in despite you quoting passage after passage to them? How many of you have watched the news recently and not thought, "This world is going to hell in a hand basket...?"

It's tempting, isn't it, to think that all hope is lost. It's an alluring trick that the tempter plays to draw your attention away from Christ and his cross to yourself and your own self-worth and pride. And it's a clever disguise when Satan paints over selfish ambition with colors of selflessness and piety. But it all leads us from Christ—which means it all leads us to hell.

Christ urges you, "Follow me." Follow him from the cross. See the nails. See the blood-soaked tree. Feel my hands. Touch my side. Stop doubting and believe! Believe that he has defeated the tempter. Trust that he has crushed the serpent's head. "Let not your hearts be troubled."

But once again, this is much easier said than done. How can we possibly know the way to heaven? Jesus isn't around today to give us such clear advice. I haven't heard of a man appearing behind closed doors and then disappearing again. No angel in the sky has given me any instructions to wait for Jesus to come. Jesus hasn't appeared anywhere since his ascension. Not on pieces of toast or random splatters of paint. He hasn't appeared to comatose accident victims or cultish leaders. You won't find him by "being one with nature." We can only find him in his Word.

He urges us to listen to the words he speaks to us: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He knew that his disciples would face temptations to look elsewhere. He knew that the Church would become corrupt. (2 Thessalonians 2) He knew that many in the church would become “lukewarm.” (Revelation 3:15,16) And he knew that many in his church would look for solutions other than in his Word. (2 Timothy 4:3) How? Because he knew what our nature was.

He knew that we, like Thomas, are so self-centered and so self-reliant that we believe that we can find a way for us to be capable of finding heaven. He knew that we would be enamored by the pop-culture philosophies of this world telling us that tolerance is to be demanded and that right and wrong cannot be determined. He knew that we would be confronted with ideas of morality and ethics that would be contrary to what he says. He knew that there would be petitions to “coexist” with each other, creating this sense of ecumenism and “kumbaya” moments that allow all faiths to come to heaven as long as they sincerely believed. And he knew that many of us would either buy it hook, line, and sinker, or be like a frog being boiled—not even noticing the impending heat. The sad reality for both is that they end in death.

But listen to Jesus’ words: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. *No one* comes to the Father *except* through *me*.” He knew that we would be looking for a way to heaven. And he very plainly spells it out for us. Look to me. Find life in me. Discover hope in me. Receive forgiveness through me.

And this isn’t easier said than done. In fact, God makes it so plainly obvious to us. While Jesus may not be here in physical, bodily form, he is here in his Word and in his sacraments. We see him clothe his people with his righteous robes as water is gently poured over the head of an infant. We “taste and see that the Lord is good” as we receive the foretaste of the heavenly banquet through the blessed supper. We understand that “whatever is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven” as the pastor forgives your sins as a called servant of Christ. And we hear, day after day, week after week, of the goodness of God’s love through Christ in his Word. We hear of the cross. We learn of his love. We see his concern for his people. And we hear that eternal life is ours through faith.

Dear Christians, believe in Christ. Trust him. Follow him. Listen to him. He knows the way to heaven. He points you there through his Word and his Sacraments. He’s given you access through his cross. So go. Answer the question for those around you. “How can I know the way to heaven?” Be bold. Be confident. Be courageous. And show them Jesus. Amen.



Soli Deo Gloria!

© 2015 Rev. Nathanael P. Seelow