

Acts 7: 54 – 8:1**John 14: 1 – 14****A PLACE, A WAY, A NAME**

INTRODUCTION: I recently read an Australian mystery novel by Jane Harper called “The Dry”. You know how it is when you read a mystery novel. You go through all the twists and turns the author concocts until you come to the end and she reveals all. Only at the end do you see then how those little incidents or bits of information in the story that seemed so inconsequential and mysterious at the time were clues for the meaning of the whole story.

That’s what we’re doing now in our Scripture readings and preaching after Easter. In the death and resurrection of Jesus the meaning of the Jesus’s story has been revealed. So much of his teaching and encounters now begin to make sense because we can know the end.

1. The Questions: In chapter 14 the time for his crucifixion is drawing near, he is bidding them farewell. The disciples’ questions are like those of little children whose parents are preparing to go out for the evening. “Where are you going? When will you come back? Will we be left alone? Who is going to stay with us?” Notice that Jesus’ disciples don’t ask about what’s going to happen to him. They ask what will happen to us?

Are they not our questions too when, like children, we are faced with the loss of parents, friends, structures of meaning, death, illness, tragedy, blind circumstance or just plain getting older and frailer? I think it is more than just a personal circumstance that makes me feel threatened by the world now. I’m sure we could come up with an impressive list if we went round the congregation. So many things that speak of suffering and death. Including the death of the world as we once knew it through the massive changes in culture and society that make us desperate for meaning. Into all of this Jesus says those opening words to disciples puzzled as we are.

Let not your hearts be troubled... This passage has been so sentimentalized and misunderstood that it has become banal. The great mystery of what, if anything, lies beyond this life on earth ruled by space, matter and time. Is there anything beyond this realm that we can call meaningful? How do we even talk about a reality that has no elements that makes things real for us? In the face of this question, Jesus offers himself as the place, the way and the name for the most mysterious journey we’ll ever take. I want to try and unpack the meaning of that comfort this morning.

2. A Place: It was Peter who asked the first question – **Lord, where are you going?** It is a very human question and trust Peter to ask it so directly. It is a human question because all human life comes to the same end that Jesus faced – death. If our lives are a journey then the end of the journey is a mystery into which we cannot penetrate – which we cannot know. Most religions are very fertile in producing words and images of what lies beyond that mystery – heaven, paradise, the next world, Nirvana, eternal life and so on, and we dress them up with all the desirable aspects of life in this one – for what else can we compare to heaven but the loveliest things of this world? We generate these images because most people cannot abide the fact that they do not know; And we don't like the idea that death is a real end of all human possibilities. Sorry, no automatic

Some Christians are among those who claim to know about what one writer called “the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell.” What do Christians know? Not much and precious little in a scientific sense. We certainly do not have access to the life beyond so that we can report on conditions there. Most people do not buy the uncertain findings of spiritualism.

All we have as Christians is a promise; A promise of Jesus that where he is going, we too shall go. There is a place for us wherever he is. We, who have staked our lives on Jesus, trust that we have a future beyond death on his promise. Our comfort is that there is a place prepared for us by him. The KJV called them “mansions”, but a better translation is “dwelling places”. That is, a place to be appropriate for life with Christ beyond the earthly life we know here and now.

And that promise is really all we have to rely on when we make that short but mysterious final journey.

3. A Way: Peter had asked, **where are you going?** a question about the destination of the journey. Jesus says annoyingly, **you know the way.** Thomas - you know, down to earth Thomas says, **Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?**

Thomas's anguished cry brings us to the heart of the matter. That place Jesus refers to has is beyond time and matter and physical existence. We do not know the destination; we have no map of the territory. There is no brochure to show us what it will be like when we get there. There are many pundits who fill this gap with imaginative pictures and other charlatans who, more for their own agendas, comfort or profit, to exploit the desire of people to know.

Jesus says we know the way because we know him. He is the way through the curtain, the light in the darkness. When we are made part of his humanity then we are on the way and can believe that we are not lost, even though we cannot see the final destination. You see, Jesus delivers us from our concerns about ourselves and our future by pointing us to himself and his future. He links himself to us and cements that bond with sacraments of baptism and Eucharist so that we have a constant reminder that our future is secure if we are joined to him.

4. A Name: Some people have great difficulty with Jesus saying **I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me**. We live in an age when plurality is the fashion. Tolerance is the big virtue. Belief, the great suspicion. When faced with the competing claims of religions, people say, "Well, we're all heading to the same place" or "when you come down to it, we're all on about the same thing" which is said usually by people who don't know much about religions at all. We are not all saying "the same thing".

Religious tolerance is not always a sign of goodwill either. Often it can be a sign of ignorance about a given religion and a failure of someone to take the time and effort needed to sit down and listen to what a religion says about itself. Worse, religious tolerance may be a sign of capitulation to the dominant, secular, anti-religious ideology of our culture which are themselves religions.

During the Nazi era for example, most of the German Christians justified the neo-paganism and quasi-Christian ideology of Hitler and the Nazis and tolerantly went along with his program of renewing German society. However, a small group of Christians who called themselves the Confessing Church, led by people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Martin Niemoller and others who opposed Hitler. In response to this false faith, confessing Christians quoted today's Scripture; **I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, but by me**. Tolerance can be a form of acquiescence to the spirit of the age, meek submission to the dominant ideology.

But Christians who interpret Jesus' words narrowly and exclusively are equally wrong. If Jesus is "the way", these words cannot be used as a formula that ties it all down, seals it shut. We Christians have been too willing to say we know what Jesus means; we know who has been accepted. Case closed. My way or no way.

This is not a text to make Christians feel smug; a text with which to beat non-believers into belief. If Christ is the way, then we need to remember how indiscriminate the love, acceptance and blessing of Jesus is. Jesus is the good shepherd who leaves the fold to go and seek the one lost sheep; he also said, **I have other sheep who are not of this fold and I am going to bring them in**

also. He is the sower who throws his seed in every direction; who lets wheat and weeds grow together; whose arms spread wide to embrace the whole world. Whose arms on the cross embraced the whole of humanity and all creation.

Christians are witnesses to **this** place, **this** name and **this** way. Christians point away from themselves to a reality they do not possess, control and can barely describe.

Conclusion: Everything Christians do is done in the name of Jesus. Looking to Jesus, we see who God is, how God is. That should make us a large hearted, generous, hospitable and non-judgmental community. People who confidently point away from themselves and their way of believing, to the God revealed by Jesus will become large hearted, generous and hospitable too. They will have hope because they have confidence in the promise of Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life.

Are we really large hearted, generous and hospitable? Have we allowed ourselves to be claimed by Jesus so that we are confident that his words **“Where I am, there you shall be also”** includes us as well as those we would exclude? These are questions that you could say would take a lifetime of exploration. And I honestly think I may have left you with more questions than answers in trying to preach the truth of this text. But it is enough. It is enough to give us hope that where he is, there we will be also.

Hold on to this: When we pass into that realm where we have nothing we can do, we trust that the Spirit, whom Jesus promised is with us, is more than adequate to bring us home.

Amen?