

When We All Get to Heaven
John 14:1-7
May 22, 2020 – Center Harbor Congregational Church
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Most of you probably know this scripture as it is written in the King James Version of the Bible – “In my Father’s house are many mansions.” That’s an odd mental picture, isn’t it? Whole mansions fitting inside one house. A better translation is the one I just read, from the New Revised Standard Version – “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,” that is, our home with God is a great big house with many rooms, room enough for everyone.

For many people, this scripture paints our imagination about heaven. And so, I wonder, when you think of heaven, what do you see? When we all get there, what will that be like? Some of us have visions of heaven that recreate wonderful experiences we have had in the past, such as the smell of bread. Others of us have images of heaven that are release from negative experiences, like a place of rest for those who are weary. And some have images of heaven that are celestial, like all the stars in the night sky. The most common thing I hear is that heaven is where we will be with our loved ones again.

My own image of heaven is in that first category, a vision of heaven that draws from some of my positive childhood memories. When I picture heaven, I think of my grandmother’s house. It was a small white house with two bedrooms and one bath, situated on the corner of a quiet residential street. Her house had a tiny front porch, just big enough for a couple of metal chairs, where we could sit for a few minutes and drink lemonade while we watched the cars go by and the children playing in the yard across the street. There were bright pink and white petunias in front of the porch and a one-car carport on the side of the house. It was not a big house with many rooms, as Jesus describes heaven. It wasn’t big at all. But it seemed so much larger when I was a five or six. That house takes up a great deal of space in my memory and in my heart.

I remember the smells of my grandmother’s house. There was always the wonderful aroma of something cooking in the kitchen – a pot roast, maybe, a mess of green beans with bits of ham, and a cast iron skillet full of cornbread, fresh from the oven.

My grandmother taught me that cleanliness is next to godliness. Her rooms smelled of soap and floor wax. I buy Dove soap today so that my bathroom will smell like hers.

I loved to spend weekends in that house. At night, after my bath, when my fingers were wrinkly from playing too long in the water and even my feet had been scrubbed clean, my grandmother would make a pallet of soft comforters on the floor in her bedroom. She covered the pallet with sheets that had a wonderful fresh smell because they had dried outside on the clothesline in the Texas breeze. My pallet was right by her bedroom window, and I remember my grandmother’s long sheer curtains tickling my cheek in the night, when they billowed out into the room.

Over the years, my grandparents lived in several different houses, eventually returning to this tiny one when my grandfather retired, so my memories of this place – and of all the places where she lived – are built up in layers over time. Getting a nickel to buy a treat from the ice cream truck as it sang its way down the street. Helping in the yard on a hot summer day and then getting a drink from the garden hose afterward. Learning to cross-stitch. Getting ready for church. All the layers of my memories have a common theme. No matter where she lived, my grandmother’s house always felt the same – warm, comfortable, welcoming. It felt like home.

Long after I was grown and had moved away from Texas, when I no longer spent the night on my grandmother’s floor, I realized that spending the night with her was really about having a place, not in her house, but in her heart, and she in mine, a place that supports and sustains me still, more than twenty years after she passed away. And so, when I think of Jesus preparing a place for me in a house

with many rooms, I see my grandmother spreading those sweet-smelling sheets on the soft pallet by her bedroom window. I am sure that's what heaven must be like.

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Our gospel text today is the beginning of Jesus' lengthy farewell discourse, his last words to his disciples, as the Gospel of John tells it. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet and shared a last meal with them, and he has given them troubling news – that one of them will betray him, that Peter will deny him, and that Jesus himself will die, not someday, but soon. The time has come.

You can imagine the disciples' reactions to this news. Some are numb, surely, unable to think at all. Some feel like they have been punched in the stomach. Some probably have difficulty breathing, as though all the air has been sucked out of the room. Time stands still, and yet tomorrow is rushing toward them, like it or not.

And in this terrifying moment, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas, bless him, the rational disciple, the one who always asks our questions for us, says, "Lord, we don't actually know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

And Jesus says, "I am the way. You know me." Jesus tells the disciples, you don't need a roadmap to heaven, but a relationship. Heaven is not about having a place to go, but a place in Jesus' heart, and he in ours.

Jesus makes the same promise to us that he made to the disciples, and it is one we can rely on when we feel like we've been punched in the stomach, or like all the air has been sucked out of our room. Jesus' promise is a relationship with him. You know me, Jesus says. Hang onto me. Remember who I am, because God is like me and I am like God. Put your trust in me. Believe in me."

"Believe in me" does not mean, "I really hope you agree that I am the son of God." No, to believe in Jesus is to live as though this relationship is real, because it is. Like all relationships it is built up in layers over time, through years and years of relying on his presence when we are weary or anxious, through hours of prayer when we don't know where else to turn, through giving thanks for blessings whenever we notice them.

Like the disciples, we can look up from our fears and breathe a little easier, even in anxious times, because we know who Jesus is, and we know that we can rely on him. I am the way, Jesus says. You know me. Trust in me, and I will get you home.

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There is a wonderful pot roast cooking on the stove, and cornbread is in the oven. There are clean, fresh sheets on the pallet on the floor. A gentle breeze puffs through the curtains, and the sweet smell of petunias meanders into the room. And God comes to greet us with open arms, saying, "See, I told you not to worry. I am always here for you. Welcome home." Amen