

## The Resurrection Way Home

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on John 14:1-14  
on May 7, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*  
I.

Just this week, our country's Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an 81-page public health advisory for the latest epidemic to sweep our nation.<sup>1</sup> This health emergency is costing our country billions of dollars a year, and has as significant an effect on the human body as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Research shows it increases the risk of premature death by nearly 30%, and those who struggle with this health issue are under far more significant risks for stroke and heart disease, depression, anxiety, dementia, pain, diabetes, inflammation, weight gain, sleep problems, addiction, and suicidality.

No, it's not covid. It's not any other typical target, like high blood pressure, or cancer, or too much sugar, or our increasingly-sedentary lifestyle. Rather, the experience of loneliness – widespread and devastating – is affecting half of all Americans in measurable ways.

Perhaps it's no surprise, given the months of isolation wrought by the pandemic, or the rise in technology that has our faces glued to screens even in the presence of people we love, or the disconnection we've experienced with people in our lives. In fact, Murthy's research looked back nearly 20 years and found that in the years since, the average American now spends 20 hours less per month with friends and 24 hours more per month alone. The many causes of widespread polarization have culled our friends list and driven wedges between families. I bet there's not a one of us in the room or

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>

watching online today that hasn't found a tight bond with a person in your life loosened, frayed, or even severed over these past years.

Murthy tells us that loneliness affects us all, in highest reported levels among teenagers and young adults. And when one in five American adults and one in three American young adults live with mental illness, Murthy's right – this is an epidemic.

The cure? It's right in front of our noses, simple yet undeniably powerful. Social connection. Face-to-face time with people we love and trust. Volunteering. Sharing physical common spaces. Allowing ourselves to see and be seen, to feel safe and brave, to cultivate kindness and generosity, to find love and be loved. Committing to each other. *Belonging*.

## II.

Let's go back several weeks in the movement of our Christian story to the night he was betrayed, and place ourselves in the upper room with Jesus and his disciples. Here in the Gospel of John's telling, Jesus knows that his hour is drawing near. His life here on earth will soon end. With compassion, Jesus offers these final words and rituals to the friends closest to him, giving them anchors upon which to hold when he departs. To their surprise and discomfort, he takes a towel and basin to their feet, washing off the dirt of the way they'd traveled. He breaks bread and shares it, telling them of an upcoming betrayal by one of their own. "Little children, I am with you only a little longer," Jesus tells them. Yet "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment," he says. *Subtext: This is important!* "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this," he concludes, "by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The disciples were mercifully confounded. *Bless their hearts.*

Blessed Peter, the emotional one, the one who'll soon deny his relationship to Jesus, the one who'll weep as the cock crows, the one who'll run faster than anyone hearing news of an empty tomb, the one who'll stand numb with fishing nets in hand wondering what is to become of his life in the aftermath of Jesus' death, the one who'll plunge into the water on the hope that his beloved friend Jesus was nearby. It's no wonder that Peter was the one to press in on Jesus. "But where are you going, Lord," he asks. "Why can't we follow you?"

Blessed Thomas, the literalist, the one who must see to believe, the one who won't be conned or tricked, the one who'll have to put his hands in the wounds is of course the one who asks the most straightforward question of them all. When Jesus says, "you know the way to the place where I am going," it's Thomas who responds, "no we don't! We don't know where you're going! What do you take us for, a bunch of mind readers? Tell us, Jesus, tell us where you're going! Tell us how we'll know the way to get there!"

Blessed Phillip, the insistent, the one among the first to follow Jesus and connect the stories of their inherited faith with the person of Jesus of Nazareth, here naming the very human hunger we all share. "Show us the Father, and we'll be satisfied," he says. To Phillip, Jesus gets personal: "have I not been with y'all this whole time, and you, Phillip, don't know me? Remember how I fed the hungry, and healed the sick, and liberated the oppressed, and let the children come to me? That's what God's like."

Peter, Thomas, Phillip, their questions and confusion and worry surely speak for their friends too. So do you see what Jesus is offering to them? To their worries, he offers tenderness. To their displacement, he offers safe

space. To their anxieties, he offers assurance. To the disorientation of loneliness he knows they'll soon feel, he offers belonging.

"Don't be troubled," Jesus says. "In my father's house there are many dwelling places. Spaces I'm preparing for you. I'll bring you with me. I'll fold you into my heart. Later, he'll say, "I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you." Do you hear these promises? *I'm here, I'm with you, you have a place, a home, one prepared with hospitality and intention. I'm staying close. You don't have to worry that you're not good enough or smart enough or equipped enough. You don't have to try and find the answer, or solve the mystery, or figure it all out. All you need is here, as Wendell Berry says. Just stay close to me. I'm departing but not leaving. But when you try to find me, don't go looking for maps on how to get there, for I am the way! I am the way, a path of truth and life. Stay close to me to draw near to the heart of God. Stay close to me; I'll never leave you.*

### III.

Writer and speaker Brian McLaren gave quite the paraphrase of this text, and the ways that Christians who long for certainty to justify their own belonging end up reading into this passage what expressly is not there – and in so doing, ensure the tightening of belonging in its interpretation. That alternative reading he offers goes something like this:

*You should be very troubled, because if you believe in God, but not me, you will be shut out of my Father's house in heaven, where there are just a few small rooms for the few who have correct beliefs... then Thomas said to him, "Lord, what about people of other religions or no religion at all? Will they go to heaven after they die?" Jesus said to him, "I am the only way to heaven, and confessing the truth about me is the only truth that will get you to life after death. None will go to heaven unless they (a) personally understand and believe a clearly-defined*

message about me, (b) personally and consciously ask me to come into their heart, © disavow any other religious affiliation, and (d) affiliate with the new religion I'm starting and naming after myself. None can come to God unless they get by me first."<sup>2</sup>

As McLaren reminds us, to find this answer is to misunderstand the question, which was not some form of "is Jesus the only way to heaven?" or "what about people of other faiths or no faith?," but rather an urgent, longing from a follower to his leader and friend: "Jesus, where are you going?" In it, in all the questions of Jesus in this passage, we hear the yearning for companionship, the fear of loneliness, the coming life crisis when the One around whom they'd oriented their lives would suddenly be gone. When the disciples' identity is wrapped up in being Jesus's followers, and then he says he's going where they can't follow, then what?

To Thomas's question, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?," let's note here what Jesus did not say. When he said "I am the way," he didn't say the church is the way. He didn't say the scriptures are the way. He didn't say his teachings or his miracles, his adherents or the religion that emerged around him was the way – as good as all of these things might be!<sup>3</sup> He didn't tell Thomas to pull himself up by his bootstraps, and put one foot in front of the other, and just figure it out on his own. No, to their earnest human longings, Jesus knew that the deepest fear they couldn't quite profess was the fear of disconnection, of isolation, of loneliness, of estrangement.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, p217.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Frederick Buechner for these images in his sermon, "Let Jesus Show," from *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, p270.

And to that fear, he promised belonging. Did you hear it in the text? Don't be afraid. Trust me. When you feel like there's nowhere you belong, know you have a home, and I'm preparing it for you. When you feel like there's no one who cares, come close to me. When you feel like there's nowhere to turn and you're stuck in the paralysis of indecision and unknowing and all that this life gives you, know that I'm the way. When you wonder what the way is, it's the way of loving one another just as I've loved you. I am the Way. Immanuel, God with us!

Funny – I'm pretty sure that 2000 years later, that primal longing for belonging has only intensified. Isn't that what's at the root of our crisis of loneliness? I tell you, as I heard Vivek Murthy describe what he understands as a potential treatment, the antidote, the vaccine to the brutal epidemic of loneliness (remember: social connection; face-to-face time with people we love and trust; volunteering; sharing physical common spaces; allowing ourselves to see and be seen, to feel safe and brave, to cultivate kindness and generosity, to find love and be loved; committing to each other; belonging) – I couldn't help but to think, *this is us!* This is the church! When we're at our best, this is what the church – not just our church, but the Church – this is what we do! Belonging is our bread and butter! Social connection is our wheelhouse! Sharing safe and brave space is our M.O.! Finding love and being love, seeing and being seen, committing to each other and something bigger and truer and more beautiful than we'll ever glimpse alone – this is our soapbox! This is us!

So it's frankly no surprise that we who are followers of Jesus and read John 14 like Brian McLaren described are a little nervous! We're feeling the urgency and the fear and the anxiety of belonging, right? We want to make

sure we're in – and sometimes that looks like demanding clarity about who's in and out of God's house. The irony though is that in a promise of belonging to Jesus and thus belonging to God, we hear isolation. In a promise of companionship, we hear disconnection. In a promise of abundance and many rooms and a wide Way of Love, we hear scarcity and smallness and a narrow path.

Friends, if we belong well to each other, it's because we belonged first to God – because God belonged first to us. From the first moment of creation to the very end of time, the story of God in this world is a story of belonging, of love, of being marked as beloved of God, where God insists on coming close to us. That is the story!

Maya Angelou said it best, “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.”<sup>4</sup> (I confess, I read that quote and heard the *Cheers* theme song! “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name!”) Friends, that ache for home is an ache to belong. And nowhere will we belong more fully and freely and unconditionally than with Jesus. No bar, no group of friends, no club, no church, nowhere do we find belonging more clearly, finally and fully and unconditionally than with Jesus. *Where are you going, Jesus? How can we know the way? Will you show us the Father?* To us all, Jesus offers us a way home. It's a Way lined with truth and life. A Way filled with fellow pilgrims on the journey. A Way where we hold the Christlight for each other – weeping with, laughing with, walking with, caring with, seeking justice with, holding with, loving with, receiving and giving grace with. A Way where the blind see and the lame dance, where we are neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and

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<sup>4</sup> Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

female, but all are one in Christ Jesus, a way where the crosses of life seem like the end, but the openness of the empty tomb is instead the place where new life begins.

#### IV.

I heard a story once of a man named Charlie. You see, Charlie had lost his father a few years back. With time, their family's pain gave room enough to sift through Charlie's father's items – well worn boots and old camping equipment, stacks of yellowed papers and artifacts from a life well-lived. Charlie, his three brothers, and their mother went down to the family's hunting lodge one day to clean it out. As they moved the dusty belongings around, Charlie noticed his father's old work table. It wasn't anything special, that worn, wooden table, but it was the place where his dad had sat so many nights – telling stories, playing cards, reading, working with his hands as he liked to do.

But today, Charlie noticed something he'd never noticed before. For in a small corner on the underside of the table, there was writing carved into the wood. Four names etched there – Frances, Langdon, Charles, James – the names of Charlie and his brothers. It was as if, even as their hearts ached with fresh grief each day their father was gone, he was still telling his sons they had a place to belong – one heart, one home, one way they would always be able to find.<sup>5</sup>

Friends, God's house is crowded, that God's table is long, that Jesus brings us with him, that when we arrive, I bet if we crouch down and look on the corner of the table, we might just spot our names etched right there, ready to welcome us home. Amen!

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to the Dear Friends for this story about our fellow pastor and Baptist friend, Charlie Johnson.