

Aftermath: The Promise of Easter

John 14:1-14

Through Jesus, God promises us an eternal home, a great Example, and awesome power.

A sermon preached by
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About two years ago, we took a family vacation to North Carolina, and among our stops was the Biltmore House in Asheville. To call it a house is at best an understatement. It is the largest privately-owned family home in America. It has four acres of floor space and 250 rooms in the house, including 35 bedrooms for family and guests, 43 bathrooms, 65 fireplaces, and three kitchens. For a house built in the late 1800's, it has such cutting-edge technology as an electric elevator, forced-air heating, centrally controlled clocks, fire alarms, and a call bell system.¹ In the days when the Vanderbilt family lived there, they were attended by a staff of 40 people in the house and barns. It is a mansion.

The Biltmore House is a magnificent place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there, even with 40 servants. It's just a lot. I don't think that's the kind of mansion God has prepared for us in eternal life. But what *can* we expect? What is Jesus promising his disciples in these words he gave to them the night before he was crucified?

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is promising us an eternal home in heaven. This journey has a destination. We have a reservation in glory, as I Peter says, "*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*"²

It's always helpful to remember the context of Scripture. The night Jesus spoke these words had already been a weird night. When they gathered for dinner, Jesus had acted like a servant and washed the disciples' feet. Then Jesus had announced his betrayal, pointed out Judas, and Judas had run out of the dinner. When Peter proclaimed his loyalty, Jesus told Peter he would also betray Jesus before the night was over. So they were all confused and troubled and anxious.

Jesus sought to reassure his friends: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.*"³ It was like he was saying, "Everybody take a deep breath. Remember who you're dealing with here. Peace."

Then he made the promise that I repeat at almost every funeral I do. "*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."⁴ The Greek word that the King James Version translates as "mansion" is *monai*. It doesn't mean a big fancy house; in the King James era, "mansion" didn't mean that, either. It simply means a dwelling place, a place to abide. It's not about the size and splendor; it's about the relationship of living together. We will be in the place where Jesus is forever.

The language Jesus uses here is reminiscent of the marriage customs of his time. Families had compounds back then, a central gathering place for cooking, eating and socializing, surrounded by separate rooms for sleeping. When sons got married, they would build a room onto their father's house. When the room was prepared, they would have the wedding, and the son would go get his bride and bring her into his father's house so they could live together. In our heavenly Father's compound, there are many places to abide. There is room for all.

That's the great promise of faith. God has a heavenly home prepared for us. And the way we know that is Jesus.

Usually in John's Gospel, when Jesus makes a profound statement, it is misunderstood. So is this one—twice! After promising them a heavenly home, Jesus tells his disciples, "*You know the way to the place where I am going.*" Thomas, later famous for doubting the resurrection, said, "*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" This gave Jesus the chance to elaborate, and he said, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.*"⁵ That should have been a "drop-the-mic" moment for Jesus, but they still didn't get it.

We still don't get it today. Some people think this statement is a discourse on world religions, claiming exclusivity of salvation for Christians alone. That's a whole different sermon, and I'm going to preach that one this fall. But remember the context. Jesus is trying to reassure a bunch of anxious friends. He is saying, "If you're confused by all this, look at me. I am the way. I am showing you the heart of the heavenly Father. Look at me, and you will see God. Know me, and you will know God."

So Phillip follows with the second dumb statement: "*Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.*"⁶ Jesus responds with the Scriptural equivalent of the modern Jewish question, "What am I, chopped liver?" He rebukes them, "How could you ask to see the Father when I have been with you all this time? How can you look at me and not see the Father? My words are God's words. My works are God's works."

Jesus is the Prime Example God has given us to know what God is all about. The Letter to the Colossians describes him as "*the image of the invisible God.*"⁷ The Book of Revelation calls him "*the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, who was and is and is to come, the Almighty.*"⁸ Whatever we know about God, we see it in Jesus.

Karl Barth was one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century. In 1962, he was on a lecture tour at Princeton University, taking questions from the audience. One student asked Dr. Barth, "Sir, don't you think that God has revealed himself in other religions and not only in Christianity?" Barth's answer stunned the crowd. With a modest thunder he answered, "No! God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity. He has revealed himself in his Son."⁹

The Son who reveals the Father makes two further promises to his disturbed disciples that night. He had said they could believe in him because of his works, but speaking of works, his disciples could expect to do more than Jesus ever thought about doing: "*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, because I am going to the Father."¹⁰ Nobody is greater than Jesus; he is the Son of God. But Jesus knew that his disciples would spread out and spread the Word about him far beyond the boundaries of Galilee and Judea. Jesus never started a church, held an office, traveled the world, or even had kids. But his followers started a movement that now numbers 2.6 billion people on the planet, in every nation. Jesus may have preached to thousands; last year 44 million people became Christians.¹¹ I can preach to any person anywhere on the globe through modern technology. Jesus healed many sick people, but the kind of medical miracles we can do today in his name through medicines, doctors and hospitals was inconceivable in Biblical times. The disciples of Jesus are doing far more today than he ever did, because he is with his Father and empowering our witness through his Holy Spirit.

The last promise in this passage is a little more problematic: "*I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*"¹² This is not a casual slip of the tongue. He says it twice, and again in the next chapter. In the other Gospels, he says similar things, telling the folks in Matthew 21, "*Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, ... even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.*"¹³ Really? Nowhere in history have I ever seen an actual mountain moved by faith. If this promise were literally true, we wouldn't need doctors or hospitals; we would just pray and people would get better—all of them! If this were literally true, no kid would ever fail an algebra test or lose a ball game. Now, Jesus adds some descriptors to the promise; you have to pray "in my name" and "so that the Father will be glorified." That would limit our scope somewhat, but some of our prayers are good and righteous—and unanswered. Sometimes that's a good thing. We could all point to things that turned out better because prayers weren't answered than if they had been. Listen to Garth Brooks' song about unanswered prayers.¹⁴

Again, remember the context. Jesus is speaking to people in Palestine 2000 years ago, and he speaks in the ways common to that time. One of the ways teachers taught in that day was by hyperbole—exaggerating a point to make it stick with people. Jesus did that all the time, like when he told sinners to cut off their hands or pluck out their eyes,¹⁵ like when he said camels could go through the eye of a needle¹⁶ or mountains could be thrown into the sea. The teaching of Jesus is not always to be taken literally; it is always to be taken seriously. Prayer is serious; Jesus is not saying that we won't ever have a bad thing happen again because we can pray it away. But he is promising this: "Bring God your burdens. Be bold when you pray. Trust that God hears your prayers. You will be blessed. Even when your prayers are not answered, God is still with you working for good."¹⁷ We believe in prayer; we believe God provides for us, sometimes in surprising ways.

Rev. Roy Smith is my brother from another mother, and several years ago, a church member took him and his young son up for a flight in a private, single-engine airplane. As they were taking off, they didn't get enough altitude, and the plane clipped some trees at the end of the landing strip. The pilot lost control, and the plane crashed. Not an answer to anybody's prayers. Miraculously, Roy and his son were not hurt, but the pilot was injured and bleeding. As Roy was trying to help the pilot out of the plane, a man came running through the woods to help. He had been jogging on a nearby trail and heard the plane go down. As he got closer, the pilot looked up and said, "That's my doctor!" If

you're going to be pulled from the wreckage of a plane, the way to do it is with your doctor holding one hand and your preacher the other! That was an answer to prayer.

If you don't get the literal answers to your prayers the way you think you ought to, it's not because Jesus was wrong. It's not because God doesn't hear or God doesn't care. It's because you don't understand. And that's OK. There are a lot of things we don't understand, even when Scripture explains them to us.

But we do understand this: God has a home prepared for us for all eternity. Jesus is our Way, our Truth, our Life, our Guide, our Example, and our Friend. The Church and we as individual Christians have tremendous potential for good in the world. Jesus gives us power to do more than we can imagine.

Steve Jobs was someone who like to understand everything. He was one of the most amazing and inventive businessmen of the last century. He was the head of Apple computers and responsible for the development of iPhones, iPads, iTunes, and a ton of other technologies that are part of the fabric of the 21st century. Jobs was not a man of faith. Suffering from pancreatic cancer, you would have thought he would have been. But the knowledge of his impending death just spurred him on to do more before he died.

When he died in October of 2011, his sister recorded and published his last words. With all his brilliance, all his expertise, all his accomplishments, as Steve Jobs passed from this world into the next, all he could say was, "Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow."¹⁸

Maybe that's how we should approach the Communion table today. Maybe that's how we should approach life, as Charles Wesley said, "lost in wonder, love, and praise."¹⁹ God is so good. Jesus is so awesome. Wow. Just wow.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biltmore_Estate.

² I Peter 1:4.

³ John 14:1.

⁴ John 14:2-3.

⁵ John 14:4-7.

⁶ John 14:8.

⁷ Colossians 1:15.

⁸ Revelations 1:8.

⁹ <http://www.actsweb.org/>

¹⁰ John 14:12.

¹¹ <https://goodfaithmedia.org/global-christian-population-projected-to-reach-3-3-billion-by-2050>.

¹² John 14:13-14.

¹³ Matthew 21:21f.

¹⁴ Garth Brooks, Pat Alger and Larry Bastian, "Unanswered Prayers," (Nashville: Capitol Records, 1990).

¹⁵ Matthew 5:29-30.

¹⁶ Matthew 19:24.

¹⁷ Adam Hamilton, *Why? Making Sense Of God's Will* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 39.

¹⁸ <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/americas/united-states/111030/steve-jobs-last-words-revealed>.

¹⁹ Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," *United Methodist Hymnal*, #384.