

Fifth Sunday of Easter
 May 10, 2020
 Sermon preached by The Rev. Kyle Wagner
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“Home is where the heart is.”

“Home is where the heart is.” “There’s no place like home.” “A person’s home is their castle.” “Home life is no more natural to us than a cage is natural to a cockatoo.” “My home is in heaven. I’m just travelling through this world.”

These are quotations that we often hear about what home is like. As I begin our reflection, I want to recognize that not everyone has a home and that for some, home is not a safe place, nor comfortable. A home can be a place of abuse and violence. I want to recognize this and encourage us all to support those who do not have a comfortable home.

What I am trying to do this morning as I speak about home is to reflect on how Jesus used the phrase to talk about what a relationship with Christ can look like. I think by the time we are done; we may see that perhaps our home is not the structure, but rather it’s the people we build into our lives that make a happy home. Just as the church is about the people.

I don’t know if you have seen the Walt Disney film “Up,” but it is a favourite in our home. It is a story about a widower named Carl Frederickson and a young boy, Russell. Carl sets out to see the world, a promise he made to his deceased wife. He fulfils his dream by tying thousands of balloons to his home and it is lifted into the sky on a fantastic adventure. The inspiration for the movie speaks to how our homes are so important to us. Carl didn’t want to leave his home, but he wanted to see the world.

The film was supposedly inspired by a true story. Edith Macefield moved into Whitewood Cottage in 1952 and lived there until her dying day at age 86. In 2006 she became famous for refusing a \$1 million offer from a developer who wanted to buy her house so he could erect a mall. Edith said no, and the developer had no choice but to build the mall around her property line. As the mall was constructed, she struck up an unlikely friendship with the construction manager, Barry Martin. Barry would check in on her to make sure she was okay, and when she became ill with cancer, he cared for her until she passed. Edith eventually left the house to Barry, who eventually sold it and put the profits towards his children’s education fund, as Edith had requested. No matter how much money Edith was offered, she would not budge. Her home was comfortable and where she well, felt at home.

Concerning John’s gospel, I’d like to make a couple of points. First, I would like to challenge, at least in this case, Jesus being a good teacher. We often hear that Jesus is a teacher and a good one. However, I’m not so sure he is in this case, but I do come around to his teaching style. In many ways, he’s like that teacher that just didn’t get you in high school. That teacher who tried to teach you grade eleven Algebra.

Secondly, I wish to make the case that scripture can provide us with profound comfort in our times of need, and particularly in these days of isolation.

And finally, I want us to reflect on what our relationship with our home say about us?

Jesus teaching the disciples is only fitting this week as the graduates of the Atlantic School of Theology celebrated their achievements online. I will also be granted my Doctorate of Ministry on Tuesday in *absentia*. Margaret Mead once said, “Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.” I agree. But as a parent I sometimes wonder if telling what you think is truth is just as functional a medicine for your child. As I said, at first glance, today’s gospel suggests that the Lord’s not a very good teacher. But in the end, as a pupil I can understand his teaching style.

In reading John, one could say that Jesus as a teacher assumes much of his student’s—the disciples. Remember, Jesus has just died, and rose again, and is with his friends. He is telling them about heaven and new life. Jesus says to Thomas, “You know the way to the place I am going.” But Thomas perhaps arguing in frustration, says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” After this question, Jesus takes Thomas to school and states in his monologue, “I am the way.”

As a teacher, Jesus also reprimands Philip in front of the whole group of students. Can’t you just see poor Philip? A lather of sweat, face turned red, looking down at his desk, stung by the teacher’s public rebuke? I mean, Philip’s request seems reasonable “Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” But the teacher says, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?”

In this lesson on the God’s dwelling place, the home, the heaven, Jesus is blunt. I can imagine him as forceful. Historically over the last 50 or so years, we have said we live in an age of reason. However, over the last four years, I’m not so sure. Nonetheless, we could say that as a society we at least want to figure out how we get to an answer, and that we don’t always take what someone says as fact. This is why when Jesus in a matter of fact way tells his friends that “He is the way” it can seem a little jarring to a person without faith.

Perhaps Jesus is an effective teacher. Maybe we are just a little slow to catch on. He’s blunt, but chapters 14-17 of John’s gospel are not called the farewell discourse for no reason. Jesus is leaving his friends immediately, and he doesn’t have much time to convince. They need to know the way. Time is short; the bus is leaving the parking lot. No clock is subtle. How can the disciples who have taken Jesus’ calls for the last three years not get it? Perhaps for us too, there are times where we just need to trust in what the teacher is saying and that “this is the answer, the way it is.” I sometimes find comfort in this approach. In times of trouble or sorrow and find scripture direct and comforting.

“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?” These words for hundreds of years have been recited at funerals and have provided comfort for countless people. Often, it is because in the reading John may be describing heaven. Writing and delivering this sermon has been therapeutic for me, and it’s interesting that it has showed up this week.

This past Friday marked the seventh anniversary of my father's death. Some anniversary dates are more meaningful than others. This year, because of today's lesson I find comfort. When hearing the words of John's gospel, I am immediately transported back to the hospital room where my father lay dying. Dad had the cruel disease of Multiple Sclerosis, and I would say he had a very tough time at the last. I can see my mother and I sitting around his bed, reading this gospel. Frequently over the course of days. I believe it was a favourite of dads. Every time I read this gospel; it gets me right in the gut. But for some reason, not the words of Jesus' reassurance, not that "many rooms for you" or the "do not be troubled." But instead, I take comfort in the confusion and the unknowability of faith as Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

In my life, there have been many times when I had to face my fears or a difficult situation and not know what the outcome would be. Times where I say, "I don't know." Times perhaps like this era of COVID-19. We don't really know when it will end. I smile when I picture Thomas asking the question because it's a good question, and a legitimate question. But I also smile at Jesus' strong answer-back. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." You see, I sometimes find comfort to my tough questions in short, matter of fact answers, that I just take at face value. I know this may not work for you, but for me, there are times in my faith journey that I agree with the algebra teacher who says, "Mr. Wagner, how can you not get this? The answer to the equation $-3 + 2x$ is 11!" Oh, Mr. Affleck, you taught me well. Oh, Jesus, you instruct us well.

I'd like to end with asking us to reflect on what our relationship with our homes says about us? As you read this sermon or watch on YouTube, you most likely are in your home. Well if you are following Dr. Strang's advice. You may be curled up with a cup of coffee in your pyjamas. For some, home is where we feel best. It's a place of comfort and safety, and often our homes describe who we are. But what is the story of our homes? What is the story of your home? I remember when Julie and I were building our house. Lots of decisions, things we could do, and things that were well, impossible.

We spent hours looking at design sketches, trying to figure out our layout. But what is a home? Is it in the design, the architecture, the furniture, or is it who dwells there with you? If I was to ask you, "tell me about your home?" What would you say? We often see our homes filled with our loved ones, and that is why this image from Jesus is so comforting. Heaven is a place of comfort because it possesses what we value. Maybe Jesus is talking about our relationship with one another? What if he might have been indicating that home is being surrounded by a loving community? What if he was trying to say, "heaven is when you are supporting one another during good times and bad when you create that loving community. It's not the building."

AMEN.