

Since I have been here at First, I have presided over more than 300 funerals. And in many of those funerals I have read a portion of what is our gospel reading for today: “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.” These words speak powerfully to those who have just experienced death. They promise that a place has been prepared for us. And if we have experienced the death of someone we love, we long to know that a place has been prepared for our loved one. We long to know that the future that this person has gone into is a secure place, a place filled with hope. Jesus’ words that he has gone into the future, preparing a way for us, are the right words to hear at a funeral.

But as is true in most of the Bible, especially in the Gospel of John, words like these are not primarily about the next life. While they are the right words for a funeral—death is not the final word; it is a future secured by God—these words of Jesus have everything to do with this life. They come at the beginning of Jesus’ final discourse—his last teaching words before he is about to die. He is attempting to reassure his disciples. He’s trying to help them deal with the fact that he’s not going to be around. And so says to them all: “Don’t let your shared life be torn apart by my upcoming death. Trust in God. Trust in me, who reveals God. In God, there is lots of room. In God, the future is secure. The future has a place for you. Don’t throw in the towel. You will make it. And I will be the means by which you will go into the future. “I am the way” into the future. You don’t need to search for a secret map. You know me. I am what you will need for the future. In other words, you will have what you need. So hang in there.

The word that is translated “dwelling places” in our gospel text—the King James’ version badly renders it “mansions”—refers to rooms that are prepared for travelers in a caravan. In caravans, someone

would go ahead of the traveling group to make sure that the accommodations for the group were arranged, so that when the group arrived the needs of the individuals would be taken care of. The point in John is that Jesus is the one going ahead of us to prepare and secure a place for us. In the journey of life, a way will be made for us. Hospitality is waiting for us. A place will be prepared.

Place...it is such a vitally important issue. We long to know that there is a place for us, that room has been made for us. Last week I mentioned the old show Cheers in which the theme song proclaims: "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name." You want a place, a place where you are welcomed, where you will have what you need to negotiate the tough stuff of life—the tough stuff like grief. You want to know that there is a place where you will discover the comfort that you will need in order to make it. Jesus is assuring his disciples that they will have that place, even though he will not be there. He's leaving; he's going into the future. But they will not be abandoned. Up ahead, in the future, they will be met by the Father, the one he reveals. The new place will be one of communion, intimacy, a future of knowing, not information, not a bunch of facts, but rather a relationship—a relationship that will give them what they need to face a new future. What is waiting for them in the future is God. They, therefore, have a secure place.

Our second reading for today which contains a marvelous description of what it means to be the church speaks of Jesus, the one who is said by John to secure the future, as "a living stone, rejected by mortals but precious in God's sight." The writer of Peter invites us to come to that living stone and become "living stones" ourselves. That's such an odd imagery. Stones aren't alive. Rocks aren't living. Ancient folks thought differently, though, and I think their view is worth highlighting. For them, rocks or boulders that are firmly rooted in the earth were thought to have a life of their own, an inherent integrity.

Their vitality, their living-ness was a function of their being rooted in a place. Rocks connected deeply to a place were thought to be alive. And that probably makes sense to many of us who are awed by giant boulders whose massiveness and stark beauty grasp our attention.

The author of First Peter tells us that Jesus is a living stone. He is a fortress, yet a fortress that is alive. We as the church are part of the rock-solid building that he is, but we, too, are alive. There is an inherent integrity to us, a vitality, an aliveness.

The place that is prepared for us is not simply a piece of geography, a building made of rocks. Jesus prepares for us a community. We have a place in the community called the church, a living organism that has deep roots. We together are living stones, helping to secure the future that we are entering, a future that indeed may contain many unknowns.

Jesus says in John that this community that we are a part of will continue the work that he has done. According to him, “the one who believes in me will do the works that I do, and in fact, will do *greater* works that [his] because I am going to the Father.” Wow, I say! We’re going to do greater works than Jesus, the man who changed water into wine, healed a man born blind, raised someone from the dead? I have some skills, but that is way beyond my pay grade. How can I or you do something greater than what he has been up to?

Jesus says that he is going to the Father, and his going to the Father means that the very energy that flows from the Father will through his Spirit now be given to the church. And through that energy, on-going, Spirit-filled community will be created. We will be a part of the greater works of forming community, community where in many ways the dead will be raised, water will be turned into wine, the blind will see. In on-going, Spirit-filled community, forgiveness will be proclaimed, freeing people from that which blinds them from seeing the possibilities of a new future, raising them up to lives—lives not shaped by the bondage of the past. In on-going Spirit-filled community, hope will be proclaimed and lived out, turning the barrenness of lack

into the abundance of wine that is enough to fulfill the needs of a whole world. In on-going Spirit-filled community, abundance will be discovered, checking our natural tendency to think that there is never enough, that we have to fight to make sure that we get ours because if we don't, we'll be left out. In on-going Spirit-filled community we will be brought into the freedom of enough—enough love, enough forgiveness, enough hope, and, yes, even enough food, for all.

Going into the future is scary, especially when what was is no longer. The promise is that as we head toward the unknown future, the future that will not be the same because of loss, there is still a place for you, for me, and for us. The scout named Jesus has gone into the future, has secured it, has prepared a place for us. That place isn't always a piece of geography. It's a community, a community formed and shaped by the breath and energy of the one who is always out in front of us making a way for us.