

Readings: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Grace to you and peace from Jesus the risen Christ – the way, the truth, the life. Amen.

You've heard the story – a poor, wayfaring traveler who pays more attention to the directions given by the GPS device than what's around them. And so, they drive into the lake because that's what the kind, gentle female voice of the GPS told them to do.

We've tried to correct the problem too, but if you put the physical address of Custer Lutheran Fellowship (12622 U.S. Highway 16A) into most internet maps and then follow the directions, you'll end up down some logging trail twenty-miles southeast of Custer. Sure you'll get a great tour of some lesser-known parts of the Black Hills, but you also might end up utilizing the services of Search-and-Rescue.

Maps – they're only helpful if they're connected to reality.

So as we turn to our Gospel reading this morning, it might help to remember the terrain, the emotional landscape of the text. As the season of Easter settles into its fourth and now fifth weeks, our Gospel readings (despite the fact that we celebrate the risen Christ and what that means for our lives) hinge back to stories of Jesus before his death, sitting around the table on his last night. It is almost as if the lectionary invites us, "Go back into the map of your memory, remember the confusion of that last night, feel the despair, listen to the direction-less disciples, but see what you notice now through the light of Easter's good news shining."

Jesus in a way tries to offer a map, direction, guidance with words of comfort, words that followers of Christ have since turned to and gathered around during times and in places where grief weighs heavy on the heart. I wouldn't be surprised if you've heard these words at more than one funeral.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus says. "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 you know the way..."

But, of course, the emotional landscape of the disciples is marked (as it often is at funerals) by a lack of direction. Death knocks on the doorstep and despair fills the air. “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” questions Thomas.

“Give us a map,” Thomas seems to say. “Just tell us how to get where we need to go.” Which is another way of saying, “We don’t want to end up in the lake, Jesus. We don’t want the shame of Search-and-Rescue showing up and having to explain what went wrong. We don’t want the loneliness of wandering down paths ‘as yet untrodden’ through ‘unknown perils.’ ” *Life would be so much easier if we just had the right map*, it’s tempting to think.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” is the mysterious reply of Jesus. “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 [the Father] and have seen [the Father].”

It’s tempting to cast this whole conversation between the disciples and Jesus (especially in light of the fact that often this text is heard at funerals) as if Jesus is laying out a map, because truly life would be so much easier if we just had the right map (then again, maybe it wouldn’t be life). We confess that this text and these words have been misused (with good intentions, no doubt), but with a result that many have been misled to think that Jesus gives here some sort of treasure map that if only you just read it correctly and follow it correctly, it’ll give you *easy* passage to an all-inclusive heavenly resort with no suffering, no loneliness, no despair.

“Ah, welcome! Checking in?” asks heaven’s hotel clerk in this scenario on the day you take your final breath of life. “Oh, let me see, did you make a reservation? Hmm... it’s not coming up here. Now, did you make a reservation with the Father’s online system? You don’t have a confirmation number, do you?”

“Ah, wait. *There* it is! Sorry for the mistake. You looked pretty worried there for a minute. Alright, is a third floor room OK? Yes, you’ll have a lovely view of the pool. But you *will* need to be a little quiet, I’ve got you booked next to a Baptist and he doesn’t know we’ve got Lutherans here. Does that work for you?”

And is that how it really works?

Or do we believe that God's love revealed in Christ Jesus is so much bigger than making sure you get your room reserved for heaven? As Lutherans, we might say something along the lines of – if you're in charge of making your own reservation for heaven, well... *good luck with that.*

These words of Jesus, "Don't let your hearts be troubled... In my Father's house there are many dwelling places..." when you look at their original emotional landscape in which they were spoken, were not words of warning: "*better get your reservation, or else!*" They were *and they are* words of comfort: "*God's love is expansive. God's love has so many rooms. Room enough for all, in fact. And don't worry, have no fear...*" Jesus says. "*Trust me. I've got the reservation covered.*"

But yes, these words have been misused. "I am the way" has been misused to point those who wander in the forest of life down even darker paths by somehow suggesting that those who *truly* follow Christ find themselves always on an easy street, when the opposite is often true.

"I am the truth" has been misused to convince those whose journey is marked by doubt for a time, that somehow doubt takes you in the opposite direction from following Christ, when the opposite is often true. When you know that it is part of the journey, doubt can, in fact, take you deeper into the mystery of God's love.

"I am the life" has been misused to tell those who are drowning in the lake of life that there is somehow a condition to God's rescuing love. As if God stands on the lifeboat holding that *rescue-thing-that-lifeguards-have*. And God says, "OK, before I throw you this *rescue-thing-that-lifeguards-use*, here are my three conditions."

I am the life, Jesus says. And it is rescue to those who have driven themselves in the lake because they took a wrong turn somewhere back at the boat dock (whether it was their fault or they were misdirected). *I am the truth*, Jesus says. And it is freedom to those stuck in doubt and despair. *I am the way*, Jesus says. And it is comfort to those who suffer and yearn for direction on the path of life.

Yesterday morning, with the help of the Rap Group, a brunch was held for the high school graduates and their families. It's hard not to be excited for them, but it's also hard not to want to just give them a map of the road ahead (whether it's through advice or otherwise).

It's a desire, an instinct that is based in love and hope for them, but it is misguided love and misdirected hope, of course. Thinking that if they avoid suffering that somehow they'll have a more abundant life, but knowing, deep down that the opposite is true.

Think of the times when you grew the most – physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially... was it because there was a lack of challenge, pain or suffering? Life is not a lack of pain or suffering. Life is not an easy street. Life is not the things you avoid, but the things you experience and endure and life is the relationships you forge through it all.

After all, Jesus seems less focused on giving a road-map for a literal geographic location to life. Instead Jesus returns again and again to words of relationship. In our Gospel reading for today alone, Jesus says it at least a dozen times. The word is "Father."

It's easy to overlook, but the very name that Jesus uses most often for God is less of a name, and more of a relationship. And it is one of the most intimate relationships with which someone can be gifted. It is not always a perfect relationship when it comes to our earthly fathers (this is most certainly true), but it is a relationship without which no one can have life on this green earth. To be born you need a Father.

All throughout the Gospels, Jesus is less concerned about offering a map to heaven and is more concerned that you know you have a dwelling place based in the deepest of relationships. And in so doing, Jesus offers himself as the pathway, the road, the journey to that dwelling place with God.

Yesterday morning, we sent the high school graduates off to their day of celebration with a prayer. I told them that it is a prayer, which I've been thinking about a fair amount these days, because at Holden Village (where I'll be moving later this summer) it's known as "The Prayer of Good Courage" and it's spoken to bless and send everyone whose time it is to leave the village. As we give thanks for Jesus – the way, the truth, and the life – and as we give thanks for the resurrected Christ who goes with you on the journey (before, beside, behind, inside and outside), offering life, truth and a way where there seems to be no way... let us do so with this prayer.

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.