

John 14: Our GPS

Our passage from John's gospel this morning contains some very familiar verses. It opens with "Do not let your hearts be troubled." We read that in our context and find it comforting, especially when we continue with verses 2-3: "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?" This is a promise made by Jesus to his disciples. We read these statements as Easter people. Next Sunday we will celebrate the Ascension when the resurrected Jesus bids a final personal farewell to the disciples. For us, these words provide deep and profound comfort in the face of death—ours or a loved ones. However, this passage is not only about life after death, but it is a text that has everything to do with our lives here and now. Because this passage is not a post-resurrection experience for the disciples their context is vastly different. The setting for this passage is Jesus' farewell address to the disciples. They have gathered to celebrate the Passover meal together. Jesus has begun this gathering by washing the disciples feet and exhorting them to follow his example—to be a servant to others and explained what this means. A new commandment about how to live in community has been given. Their context is this is part of the lengthy discourse of Jesus on the night he was betrayed. During this discourse, Jesus will reveal that Judas will betray him; that they all will desert him. Judas has left to carry out the betrayal which will come this night. Jesus reveals that he will not be with them much longer even though the suffering and death upon the cross are still in the future, the immediate future, but they have not yet occurred. Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples, those he has chosen to continue his work, for that future and tell them how they are to continue. He tells them he is going to leave them. He says that they cannot come where he is going but that he will return for them. No wonder as this passage begins the disciples are troubled. It is though the ground is shifting beneath their feet. Jesus responds to their justified anxiety with "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." With this Jesus calls them back to this fundamental relationship of trust and assures them that they are not going to be abandoned. He tells them that he is returning to his Father, which is good news for them because he goes to prepare a place for them. Jesus is assuring them that they will be with him and dwell with him in his intimate relationship with the Father. Jesus knows their weaknesses and he is offering them encouragement that despite what is coming, despite how they will behave, despite it all—they will indeed fulfill the mission they have been chosen to do. He offers them a promise—an astounding promise—to the very ones he has just told he knows will deny and desert him. The promise: Even though they will abandon him, he will not abandon them. The promise is there is a place for you, prepared by me, with God; where I am, you will be, too. In this promise the description has moved beyond the resurrected life to the ascended life with God. Jesus is not talking as much about literal physical places of residence awaiting them as he is describing dwelling in the presence of God, sharing in that presence with Jesus. Verse 3: "And you know the way to the place where I am going." Jesus has told them he is going to ascend to the Father; that is the place he will now reside, with the Father. As usual the disciples don't understand what they are being told. What follows is how the disciples heard this promise. Like many or most of the characters in John's gospel, Thomas hears Jesus' promise of place on the literal level. Like Nicodemus as puzzled by the idea of being born again, Thomas does not understand where Jesus is going and asks how to get there.

“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas wants a map, a diagram or in our modern parlance: a GPS into which he can plug an address and be guided to this destination. Jesus responds with one of the most well-known “I AM” statements from John’s gospel: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” All of the “I AM” statements in John’s gospel make known Jesus as the source of life, abundant grace and signal the presence of God who self-identified to Moses as “I AM”. This is the passage contains the clearest statements we have by Jesus of his divinity. What immediately follows this “I AM” statement unfortunately seems to contradict most of what we have been told about Jesus and his ministry to reconcile the world to God through love and grace. “No one comes to the Father except through me.” has been used like a trump card or a threat to tell people that they had better get with the program in order to be saved. To interpret the verse this way is to take it out of the context and do violence to the spirit of Jesus’ words. It becomes an indication of God’s judgment, exclusion, and absence. It tends to make the promise Jesus made a conditional one. The entirety of Jesus’ ministry is about God’s presence with us, about God’s love for the whole world. We need to remember the statement is uttered in the midst of a promise made by Jesus to offer comfort to his disciples. He is telling them the he himself is all they need; there is no need to panic, no need to search desperately for a secret map. In the relationship they have with Jesus, they have all that they will need. Jesus is their GPS. Jesus adds, “If you know me, you will know my Father also.” This is a conditional statement which is the Greek is stating a condition of fact, that is the condition is understood to be true (they do know Jesus), so then they also know the Father. Just to prevent misunderstanding, Jesus then adds: “From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Now it is Phillip among the disciples who is not quite sure of what this means. He persists by asking, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus has just told them that in knowing him they know the Father. Jesus reminds Phillip, who in John’s gospel has been there throughout all of Jesus’ ministry that he should already know that being with Jesus he has been in the presence of the Father. “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father.” God has been present all along, doing “works” of healing, teaching what God desires for the way we live. All these things which Jesus has done have shown the heart of God to those who have witnessed them. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart who has made him known.” Jesus has made known to us the heart of God, and he has entrusted this mission of “making known” to us. Jesus’ mission was to show the world just how great God’s steadfast love described in the Hebrew Scriptures is and always has been. Within John we are told that God is love, unconditional love. Another way to view these two statements besides remembering the context of this passage is to think about conditional statements. For example, consider this statement: “I will always love you.” This is a promise, a vow, if you will. That is clear. But what if the statement is instead: “I will always love you if you love me.” That isn’t the same thing, is it? In fact, behind the promise of love there is an implied threat: “And if you don’t love me—or perhaps even, love me as I think you should—then I won’t love you.” Jesus makes a profound promise to his disciples early in the passage in response to their reaction to his news that he is leaving. “Though I go away, it is to prepare a place for you in the presence of my Father. I will come back for you and we will be united again in time.” There is nothing conditional about this. It is sheer promise. But because the disciples do not understand what he is saying and mistake his metaphorical reference to a place—his Father’s house—for a geographical space, Thomas

then asks for directions he can plug into his GPS. Jesus response in another unconditional statement: "I am the way, and the truth and the life." In other words: "Thomas, you already know the way." Precisely because Thomas knows Jesus, he can't get lost. In the addition that Jesus makes to this promise is the statement that we hear as a conditional statement. In the Greek it is not conditional but describes an already existing state: the disciples know the Father just because they know Jesus. This is made clear by the interaction between Phillip and Jesus. "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Jesus' words here seem less meant to keep people out than they are to assure his troubled followers that they are in, really in. Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension are essentially about one thing and one thing only: revealing the loving nature of God in order that we all may have access to God's abundant grace and life. The passage is finally not about who is out, but about who is in—all who have seen Jesus or come to know Jesus through the testimony of his disciples. Sheer promise. The passage ends with another promise: "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." This adds a bit of a twist to our usual conception of heaven. When Jesus talks about going to prepare a place for us, we tend to think in very far-off, eternal themes. But Jesus is telling us that his departure to be with the Father not only secures our place in God's presence but also creates the possibility to follow Jesus in doing the work he was sent to do—right now, in this very present moment. For the author of John, heaven is as much a present-tense category as it is a future one. Jesus has called on his followers to love others as he has loved them. We are Easter people. We have our GPS, our set of directions for living, our key for being in God's presence. We live in the light of the promises of Jesus, the one who came to reveal God's unconditional love for the world. Thanks be to God.