

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
May 14, 2017  
Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 17:1-15  
Psalm 66:1-11  
I Peter 2:1-9  
John 14:1-14

We are steadily making our way through the Easter season, following along with Jesus as he makes his post-resurrection appearances. In these latter weeks we prepare for Jesus' departure where he will ascend to the Father.

This is precisely what Jesus is doing with his disciples in John 14. The primary thrust of this text is to soften the blow of Jesus' announcement of his departure. Think about it for a moment. If you were part of the group of these early disciples, Jesus' sudden departure would be a major crisis. So here in John 14, Jesus tells the disciples that he is leaving them.

But the reason for his leaving is important. "I am going," he says, "to prepare a *place* for you."

Let's pause for just a moment to put these words in context.

You remember that from the time of Holy Week and beyond I have tried to show that the biblical writers (especially John) saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes about the coming Messiah. Those hopes centered around the belief that a *new* Moses would come who would lead the people on a *new* Exodus from slavery and into a *new* Promised Land.

By his words and actions at the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrated that he was not only the new Moses who was ready to lead the people on a new Exodus, but he was also *the* Passover Lamb who would be offered up in order to inaugurate the new Exodus.

And as the children of Israel needed to be fed and sustained on their journey toward the Land of Promise, even so the people of the New Covenant need to be fed and sustained on their journey of deliverance from sin.

The children of Israel were fed by manna, supernatural food that came down from heaven. But as the leader of the new Exodus, Jesus says this: “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they all died. “I am the Living Bread come down out of heaven. And the bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Jesus did just that, offering himself up as the true Passover Lamb. Then, subsequent to his resurrection, he revealed to his disciples at Emmaeus that because things had changed and he was soon to ascend to the Father, he would be known to them from that moment in the Eucharistic bread.

And now when you come back to our text for today, this all begins to make sense again as we hear these words of Jesus. Here’s what I mean:

When the children of Israel were redeemed from slavery in Egypt, when they experienced the Passover and then traveled through the desert being fed by

supernatural bread from heaven, what was the eventual outcome of all of that?

What was the ultimate goal or purpose?

The answer: *The Promised Land. The place God had prepared for them.*

The land flowing with milk and honey, the land rich with fruit and produce, the land of complete abundance.

And here is Jesus – the *new* Moses come to lead the people on a *new* Exodus from slavery to sin, feeding and sustaining them on their journey not with perishable manna, but with the supernatural food of his own body.

And in this new Exodus, what is the eventual outcome? What is the ultimate goal or purpose?

The answer: “Let not your hearts be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me. There are many rooms in my Father’s house, and *I am going to prepare a place for you, so that you will always be with me where I am.*”

The ultimate goal or outcome of the *new* Exodus is the same as the goal of the old Exodus: *The Promised Land, the place God has prepared for God’s people.* But instead of the land flowing with milk and honey, this will be the New Jerusalem, where justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The place where death and sorrow and crying and grief and pain are banished, and every tear wiped dry.

These are such comforting words from Jesus. Such powerful words. Such reassuring words. They are words we might readily hear in a funeral sermon. And indeed, of the many sermons I've heard from John 14, most of them have interpreted Jesus' words in a *personal* or *individual* sense. That is to say, Jesus assures the individual believer that he is going on ahead to heaven to prepare a place there for the one who trusts in him.

And that's probably true as far as it goes, I suppose. But the pronoun "you" in many places in this passage is in the plural, not the singular. Jesus is speaking to a group, to a community, and by extension to the Church. Jesus is the *new* Moses, leading the New Covenant people on a *new* Exodus. His words here are not merely a promise to *individual believers* that their mansion in heaven is under construction. **It is a promise to the New Covenant people that their relationship with God will not be severed when Jesus physically leaves the scene.**

He will continue to be known to them and to feed them with Living Bread in the Eucharist. But the ultimate outcome of this journey is what?

*The place God has prepared for God's people.*

I don't want to shatter your long held image of Jesus preparing your "mansion just over the hilltop" as the gospel song puts it. But I want to supplement that image with his words here by saying that his promise *extends to*

*the Church*. And even though he is physically gone, the Church has an abiding place with God that keeps us connected with him.

I think Peter alludes to this in today's epistle with the marvelous images of the Church. He calls the Church a "living temple," with Christ as the capstone or the cornerstone. We are a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices up to God which are pleasing in his sight. We are a chosen race, a holy nation, God's very own people. That relationship did not end when Jesus ascended to the Father. In fact, Jesus' departure is what really made that relationship *truly* possible.

If you're still not sure about this communal reading of Jesus' words, look with me at verse 12, which reads: "The truth is, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, *and even greater works*, because I am going to be with the Father."

I'm not sure how much I actually believe that statement. The thought of exceeding the works of the Son of God while he was on earth is tough to accept.

But think about it for a moment. Our struggle to accept this is because we go back to reading it through *personal* and *individual* lenses.

But we should note that in the next two verses (13-14) Jesus says that this promise is for "those who believe and who pray in his name." And again, the pronoun "you" is plural here. When Jesus says "You can ask for anything in my

name, and I will do it,” the promise is for *the community of faith*, not just the individual.

When I think about me as an individual believer doing greater works than Jesus did, it seems a bit preposterous. But when I think about the *Church* doing such, it becomes a little more plausible. After all, Jesus was here a limited time. He was only in one place at a time.

But the Church now permeates the world. And as she ministers in Jesus’ name, persons are healed, saved, forgiven, changed, just as they were when Jesus was doing it in person.

And so, Jesus promises to sustain the Church and to empower her to do even greater works than he did while he was here.

Both as individuals and as the Church, we can embrace an uncertain future and the anxiety that comes with it, because we have a stake in what God is doing. We are a New Covenant people, a people on a *new* Exodus making our way toward a *new* Land of Promise. Jesus is going to ascend to the Father. But that doesn’t mean he has left us, or left us alone. He still comes to us in the Eucharistic bread, feeding us on our journey with himself, with the Living Bread come down from heaven.

And best of all -- the One in whom we place our faith has promised to lead us all the way home.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.