

When We All Get to Heaven  
John 14:1-7  
May 10, 2020 – First Congregational Church of Meredith, NH and Sanbornton  
Congregational Church, Worshiping Together  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

*This is a joint sermon on a single topic. Rev. Ruth Martz's sermon follows this one.*

**John 14:1-7** -- "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? 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me. If you know me, you will know God also. From now, on you do know God and have seen God."

Most of you probably know this scripture as it is written in the King James Version of the Bible – "In my Father's house are many mansions." That's an odd mental picture, with whole mansions fitting inside one house. A better translation is the one I just read, from the New Revised Standard Version – "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," that is, our home with God is a great big house with many rooms, room enough for everyone. For many people, this scripture paints our imagination about heaven. And so I wonder, when you think of heaven, what do you see? When we all get there, what will that be like? I asked this question to the Bible study group this week. Their answers fell in three categories, I

would say. Some of us have visions of heaven that recreate wonderful experiences we have had in the past, such as the smell of bread. Others of us have images of heaven that are release from negative experiences, like a place of rest for those who are weary. And some have images of heaven that are celestial, like all the stars in the night sky.

My own image of heaven is in that first category, a vision of heaven that draws from some of my positive memories. When I picture heaven, I think of my grandmother's house. It was a small white house with two bedrooms and one bath, situated on the corner of a quiet residential street and one of the busier thoroughfares of my little town. Her house had a tiny front porch, just big enough for a couple of metal chairs, where we could sit for a few minutes and drink lemonade while we watched the cars go by and the children playing in the yard across the street. There were bright pink and white petunias in front of the porch and a one-car carport on the side of the house. It was not a big house with many rooms, as Jesus describes heaven. It wasn't big at all. But it seemed so much larger when I was a five or six. That house takes up a great deal of space in my memory and in my heart.

I remember the smells of my grandmother's house. There was always the wonderful aroma of something cooking in the kitchen – a pot roast, maybe, a mess of green beans with bits of ham, and a cast iron skillet full of cornbread, fresh from the oven. My grandmother taught me that cleanliness is next to godliness. Her

rooms smelled of soap and floor wax. I buy Dove soap today so that my bathroom will smell like hers.

I loved to spend weekends in that house. At night, after my bath, when my fingers were wrinkly from playing too long in the water and even my feet had been scrubbed clean, my grandmother would make a pallet of soft comforters on the floor in her bedroom. She covered the pallet with sheets that had a wonderful fresh smell because they had dried outside on the clothesline in the Texas breeze. My pallet was right by her bedroom window, and I remember my grandmother's long sheer curtains tickling my cheek in the night, when they billowed out into the room.

Over the years, my grandparents lived in several different houses, eventually returning to this tiny one when my grandfather retired, so my memories of this place – and of all the places where she lived – are built up in layers over time. Getting a nickel to buy a treat from the ice cream truck as it sang its way down the street. Helping in the yard on a hot summer day and then getting a drink from the garden hose afterward. Learning to cross-stitch. Getting ready for church. All the layers of my memories have a common theme. No matter where she lived, my grandmother's house always felt the same – warm, comfortable, welcoming. It felt like home. Long after I was grown and had moved away from Texas, when I no longer spent the night on my grandmother's floor, I realized that spending the night with her was really about having a place, not in her house, but in her heart, and she in mine, a place that supports and sustains me still, more than twenty years after she passed away. And so, when I think of Jesus preparing a place for me in a

house with many rooms, I see my grandmother spreading those sweet-smelling sheets on the soft pallet by her bedroom window. I am sure that's what heaven must be like.

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Our gospel text today is the beginning of Jesus' lengthy farewell discourse, his last words to his disciples, as the Gospel of John tells it. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet and shared a last meal with them, and he has given them troubling news – that one of them will betray him, that Peter will deny him, and that Jesus himself will die, not someday, but soon. The time has come. You can imagine the disciples' reactions to this news. Some were numb, surely, unable to think at all. Some felt like they had been punched in the stomach. Some probably had difficulty breathing, as though all the air had been sucked out of the room. Time stood still, and yet tomorrow was rushing toward them, like it or not.

And in this terrifying moment, Jesus says, "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? 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas, bless him, the rational disciple, the one who always asks our questions for us, says, "Lord, we don't actually know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus says, "I am the way. You know me." Jesus tells the disciples, you don't need a roadmap to heaven, but a

relationship. Heaven is not about having a place to go, but a place in Jesus' heart, and he in ours.

Jesus makes the same promise to us that he made to the disciples, and it is one we can rely on when we feel like we've been punched in the stomach, or like all the air has been sucked out of our room. Jesus' promise is a relationship with him. You know me, Jesus says. Hang onto me. Remember who I am, because God is like me and I am like God. Put your trust in me. Believe in me." "Believe in me" does not mean, "I really hope you agree that I am the son of God." No, to believe in Jesus is to live as though this relationship is real, because it is. Like all relationships it is built up in layers over time, through years and years of relying on his presence when we are weary or anxious, through hours of prayer when we don't know where else to turn, through giving thanks for blessings whenever we notice them. Like the disciples, we can look up from our fears and breathe a little easier, even in anxious times, because we know who Jesus is, and we know that we can rely on him. I am the way, Jesus says. You know me. Trust in me, and I will get you home.

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There is a wonderful pot roast cooking on the stove, and cornbread is in the oven. There are clean, fresh sheets on the pallet on the floor. A gentle breeze puffs through the curtains, and the sweet smell of petunias meanders into the room. And God comes to greet us with open arms, saying, "See, I told you not to worry. I am always here for you. Welcome home." Amen

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**Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16**

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame;

in your righteousness deliver me.

Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily.

Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

You are indeed my rock and my fortress;

for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

take me out of the net that is hidden for me,

for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;

you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

Like many of you who were raised in the church as children, I heard God described as living in heaven, "above, on high, on a lofty throne," and I understood that after death, Jesus promised us eternal life in a beautiful, peaceful place. So I pictured both God and heaven as somewhere far away up in the sky, distant and separate from earth down below. Strange as it may sound, I have come to understand how God worked through my first image of heaven to sow the seeds of faith within me.

I grew up in a family that offered me opportunities for education and travel that were wonderful blessings. But there was also a lot of tension in our household. I

always felt that my parents' love was conditional upon my being a good girl, with perfect behavior, outstanding grades, the right body size, and the right friends. Of course, I couldn't be perfect, nor could my brothers, even though we worked hard at it. Our family didn't talk about feelings, so I learned to hide my hurt and shame. No matter how hard I tried, I never felt good enough, pretty enough, smart enough.

The psalmist prayed: *In you, O God, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness, deliver me.*

When the tension was too great, I would lie on my bed and imagine myself way up in the sky, lying on wonderfully cushy clouds where God was. I would sink down into the warm fluffiness surrounding me, hugging me, and there was often a voice softly humming. I don't think that we talked a lot, we just spent quiet time together. My distress at myself and at others would slowly ease; I would rest in mind, body and soul, my whole being soothed, comforted, at peace, delivered from shame. For me, this was heaven, at least in this life: a safe, tranquil place where I was loved just as I am, warts and all. And I would rise out of bed knowing that this place was always there for me.

At the same time, heaven wasn't only a far-away place for me as a child. God also brought the beauty and glory of heaven to me through music. There is a lovely saying; *Bach gave us God's word, Mozart gave us God's laughter, Beethoven gave us God's fire. God gave us music so we might pray without words.*

Well, for me, it was singing with the Junior choir at church: singing "This Little Light of Mine" and "The Lord's Prayer." Of course, I didn't realize that I was discovering the peace and joy of heaven on earth; I just knew how good it felt, sometimes losing myself in the music, whether I was singing or listening, at other times feeling the emotions being stirred inside me. At home, I also listened endlessly to records of musicals like Oklahoma and South Pacific. I realize now that through music, God opened my heart to feel what was going within me, not only sadness but also joy, not only shame but also love and hope.

Heaven is about release, the freedom to be oneself, whether it is a time to cry or a time to laugh. As you know, music can make our spirits soar, lifting us up, breathing new life into us. For me as a child, that meant not only singing in church but also dancing in my bedroom---

*(Singing) Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry, when I take you out in the surrey... !*

I think that God gave us music to pull at our heartstrings and inspire our souls, with a lot of grace notes guiding us along the way. Even as music transports us to another place, a beautiful and holy space, it is flowing through our voices, ears, and bodies. Heaven embodied. Every glimpse of heaven comforts, strengthens, and inspires us, guiding us anew in the unfolding of God's kingdom or kin-dom, that Jesus proclaimed as already here in our midst and not yet realized.

When you look back to your childhood, where or how did you experience heaven on earth? What did it look like or feel like? How about today, where do you recognize signs of heaven, even in the midst of this pandemic?

You see, God always finds a way to reach us, when we are too young to know it or too distracted to recognize God-with-us. Jesus says to his disciples: *You know the way to the place where I am going.* And Thomas replies: *We do not know... How can we know the way?*

We do know the way to heaven, revealed in and through Jesus who brought healing and freedom to people living in shame. I don't go up into the clouds anymore to find God in heaven, for I have come to believe that both heaven and the way to heaven are right here in front of us, around us, between us and within us.

Sharing a relationship grounded in deep, authentic love. Heaven on earth.

Reaching out with compassion, advocating for justice, finding loving support in times of grief and forgiveness in times of conflict. Heaven on earth.

Suddenly catching a glimpse of who you truly are, a beloved child of God with gifts to share. The glory of heaven on earth, it's as wondrous as a child's imagination where the seeds of faith are sown.

*Lead me and guide me, the psalmist sings. Into your hand I commit my spirit, you have redeemed me, faithful God.*

There are many dwelling places in God's house, in this life and beyond, places filled with tenderness and peace, beauty and inspiration, wonder and laughter, places where hearts are opened and transformed, where souls find rest on cushy clouds and voices rise up singing.

Call it heaven or God's realm;

Call it God embodied and revealed in Christ.

Call it Love, resurrecting love. Alleluia!

Thanks be to God. Amen.