

I have read the opening words of today's Gospel many times at funeral services. On such occasions, they offer a very special comfort. Within the Christian community, they are heard as words of the risen Lord. They are understood not as *dreams* of what might be, but as *realities* which the living Christ brings into being. In the face of death, these words bind Christian believers to their Lord and to one another in faith and hope.

I still read this beautiful passage at funerals, of course, but I sometimes wonder: have we so associated this Gospel with Christian *dying* that we are blinded to its message for Christian *living*? Have we limited its meaning too drastically?

I ask that because the fact is, these words are given as guidance for *life* at least as much as to comfort Christ's followers at a time of death. When Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you..." he was concerned not only with "a place for us" after death, but "a place for us" in our *living* ministries. He wanted to prepare a place for our witness as disciples of the Christian message.

The funeral context may help us realize that a *complete* union with Christ cannot be attained on this side of the grave, but that same context may keep us from understanding that, *at this very moment*, we are united with Christ. There is an *earthly orientation* to these words that's just as important as the heavenly one.

That this is so, is evidenced by Jesus' response to Philip later in the Gospel. Philip has been with Jesus for a long time. And yet, something in him tugs at his feelings, saying, "I want more than I've been getting." I've been with Jesus day in and day out but where's that Father he keeps talking about? And Jesus tells him, "Philip, when you see me, you're *seeing* the Father." The only Father you can know is the Father *my* life reveals.

I have to say, there are times when I know just how Philip is feeling. Philip, it seems, wants to experience some kind of an overpowering encounter that will "unmask" the Father – and all he gets is the same Jesus he's quite used to seeing. Jesus senses this, of course. He seems to know that Philip wants more. But he also knows the limited nature of our ability as human beings to experience God's self-revelation.

And so he tells Philip, *believe. Live by faith and not by sight* because *soon* you aren't even going to have *me* around as the physical presence of God in your midst. And

you've got to know *God will still be there*. God will still be alive, acting, staking the divine claim on your life. And the divine claim is simply this: "***I am the way, the truth, and the life.***"

I have often wished these words were verbs and not nouns because I see them as describing Jesus' *activity*, Jesus' *mission*. They are more than nouns. They are more than special qualities Jesus possesses. They make some claims with some *demands* to them. Demands that require more of us than a mere nod of assent.

- We've got to know not just the assertion that Jesus is the **way**; we need to learn *actively* what makes him the way.
- We've got to know *by our lives* what makes him the **truth**.
- We have to look around us and *do something* about this **life** he claims to be.

But that sense of these words as *active* goes further. Listen carefully to Jesus' *next* set of words. He told them that if they would carry on his living ministry, they would do even *greater* works than he did. Isn't that astounding? But you know what? *They did*. They *did* show greater works.

- Never once did Jesus bring 3,000 into his fold in one day. On the day of Pentecost, *they did*.
- The healings recounted in the Book of Acts go far beyond anything Jesus ever did.
- The Good News about Jesus the risen one spread like wildfire until Christian believers could be found all over the Mediterranean world. Jesus never managed that. He never got beyond 75 miles from his home.

But there's more.

- Prisoners were miraculously freed from their chains.
- People spoke languages they had never been taught.

You see, Jesus' promise to his disciples came true. They *were* able to do even greater things than he did. And they did so with astounding results.

Today, we are called to hear Christ's promise: "I have gone to prepare a place for you." Are we going to lay back and *not expect* Jesus to work in and through us to accomplish things that would seem humanly impossible? Jesus spoke of "rooms" or "dwelling places" (the old King James called it "mansions") that he was about to open to them. I wonder if Jesus might just be opening up to us even more? More than just places

to abide in death, but a place to enable the opportunities that come with life! Ministry opportunities we look upon and say, “Impossible! Can’t be done!”

I hear people *still* saying what we’re doing here in the Shared Ministry is impossible for small churches like ours. And, with the grace of Christ, we are doing them. Just this week, we had a meeting of the Discernment Team that is studying the possibilities for our future. We began enumerating all the outreach ministries these two little churches are doing. Without blinking an eye, we ended up naming nearly 30 such ministries – some of them quite substantial and impactful.

You see, I see Jesus calling us to where *new* opportunities are opened up for spreading the Good News. New opportunities that require us to stretch ourselves and take risks so we can grow.

“I go to prepare a place for you.” Jesus speaks these words not just to a select few of us, but to *all* of us as a community of faith. Can we but follow? Can we but take him at his word and step out in faith? Step out like Philip, step out like Thomas and Peter and the others – who surely stumbled in their steps but kept marching forward to where God was taking them?

“I go to prepare a place for you.” These are words that speak not of *dreams* – but *realities*. Following Christ, let us make them realities powered by the love of the One who *is* the Way, the Truth, and the Life. By the one who promised, you will do even *greater* works than I have done. Amen.