

“Jesus – the Mansion Builder”

John 14:

+Easter 5, Year A+

April 24, 2004

Jerusalem my happy home
Would God I were in thee
Would God my sorrows were at an end
Thy joys that I might see

The Sundays after Easter give us powerful images of our Resurrected Lord. These weeks between the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord were forty days when Jesus opened the Scriptures to His disciples – showing them clearly how He was, is, and ever shall be the fulfillment of the prophecies of Israel. His appearance to Thomas, meeting him in the midst of his doubts to bring him love and assurance gives hope to all of us who have questions of faith. His words burning in the hearts of the disciples who traveled with Him on the road to Emmaus remind us of the power of the Word Made Flesh – Jesus, the ever-living Word at work in our hearts that goes beyond printed words. Last week we heard of the Good Shepherd – the tender, loving, strong-on-our-behalf Shepherd laying His body down in front of the doorway to the sheepfold – no one can get at those in His care for He would give His very life for the sheep of His pasture – for those He loves, for you and me. And today – well, today we meet the “Mansion Builder” – the son who must be about His Fatherses’ business (note the plural of fathers, there). Both God the Father and Joseph, you see, were builders and creators – let me rephrase that, God the Father is The Creator and all who create and build things are just a reflection of this aspect of God’s eternal character of bringing things to life and life eternal.

When Jesus begins this morning with the words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God believe also in Me” he is speaking from his own troubled heart. This text from John takes place immediately after Judas has left the Last Supper having been revealed as the Betrayer. In the words just before our text begins Jesus has told Peter that he will deny him three times. And then in the very next breath, after these painful revelations he says, “Let not your hearts be troubled...” The very word he uses for “troubled” is the same word used earlier in John’s Gospel to describe Jesus’ state of mind at the grave of Lazarus where he openly weeps and later in this same evening’s events to describe Jesus as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is a heart overcome with sorrow and terror— the anguish of one so traumatized, they can barely groan or gasp or sigh.

Think of how the heart of Jesus must have been troubled for His disciples knowing all that lay before them in the hours and days to come? So he takes a breath and looks at the whole picture – scans the broadest horizon to see the whole scope of events and opens the heavens before them – “in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places/many mansions. 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.”

Betrayal, denial, all of them scattered and afraid – the horror of the cross before Him – is it any wonder Jesus looks for a moment to the heavens? Being one with the Father – made of the same “stuff” – of the same mind – Jesus had left the heavens to come to earth, fulfill the law – but the pain is so great even in the midst of a special supper of celebration that he points them to heaven. Right there in the presence of the very love of God incarnate the turmoil of sin, ruptured relationships; avarice and self-preservation was on the brink of overcoming the relationships they had built over three years together – despite all the miracles they’d witnesses, all the power of God they had seen at work through Jesus.

But the brokenness of sin is not how God’s creation will remain – Jesus, having completed our redemption, defeated Satan and broken the bonds of death went to the right hand of the Father to prepare a place where we will be with Him forever. How wonderful it must have been for Him to share that real and certain hope with His disciples that night when, certainly, it seemed least possible.

No wonder Thomas wanted to make sure he had the directions to get to this incredible place the Creator and the carpenter’s son was going to prepare. Overcoming the male stereotype he doesn’t hesitate to ask how to get to this destination: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

And Jesus answers with the words that have become the impetus of the church – the Good News we must preach, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through Me.” You noticed I said, “the Good News we MUST preach.” Part of the gift of saving faith in Jesus and the infilling of the Spirit is the desire to carry out God’s command to take Jesus to the world. We are graced by this command to go into the world, to be light, salt – to be known by our love in word and deed. Sharing Jesus is something we can’t help but do – to bear witness to the hope we hold.”

That’s what the Pope said in his address on Friday at the service where my brother Dave brought him greetings from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. The Pope gave a clear witness to Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life – the “hope that we hold.” It’s a hope so evident that people will ask you about it. But I must admit when the Pope said, “Jesus is the message the world wants to hear” my reaction was. “Right – the world wants to hear about Jesus.” And as the law always does when it pierces my heart I wondered when I’d gotten so jaded, so unsure of this hope that we hold. But the sweet Gospel of hope was there immediately to encourage.

For those of you who didn’t see it live on EWTN the Pope smiled when he spoke to my brother. I found out why yesterday. My brother said, “I bring you greetings from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.” In a very genuine way the Pope said, “Ah! The Missouri Synod Lutheran!! Please greet them all in the Missouri Synod for me!” My brother went on to say, “As you know, the Missouri Synod is the baptismal home of our mutual friend Father Richard John Neuhaus.” (He was an LCMS pastor who became a Roman Catholic priest – my brother was in his study group when he was a young pastor in Brooklyn). Again, the Pope responded warmly and grasped Dave’s hands, saying “Yes! Wonderful!” Then Dave ended his 17 seconds with the

Pope by saying, "I am thankful for the theme you have chosen - Christ Our Hope. It mirrors the simple confession of Martin Luther, 'Was Christum treibet.' God bless you."

Now if your German is as little and poor as mine I will explain as best I can what this means. What drove Martin Luther's theology – or he would say what is the center of the proclamation of the whole New Testament and the church is "Was Christum treibet" – (What drove/urges/is centered in Christ). Always our witness points to Jesus as the only Way, the only Truth, the only Life – that no one comes to the Father except through faith in Him.

When I called our mother to tell her I'd just seen Dave on TV she said, "He was on TV?" I said, "Don't you remember what Dave was going to do today?" She said, "He was meeting some priest, right?" I said, "NO MA IT WAS THE POPE!" But in her sweet simple way I suppose she had it right. We are all of us the priesthood of the church called to be equipped and empowered by the Word and strengthened by the Sacraments to go out and give witness to Jesus – to "the hope we hold."

The Pope leaves for home today so I don't imagine you'll have a chance to quote any other words of Luther to him but who do you know today who needs to meet Jesus – or to meet Him again in a new way – to know Jesus as the Way and to find the incredible depth of God's love? Who do you know who needs forgiveness (maybe even from you!), who needs to know that it's ok to have doubts (the disciples didn't kick Thomas out of the fellowship of believers that first week – and he didn't even believe in the resurrection! They loved him, included him, prayed with him – and let God meet him right where he was at). Oh, I think that all of us know someone in need of that touch – now "Go and Tell" so they can "Come and See." AMEN

Now may God's peace that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in true faith in Christ Jesus until we are all walking the streets of gold in the New Jerusalem surrounded by forgiveness and joy! AMEN