

Easter 5 A  
John 14:1-7  
May 7, 2023

*The ONLY Way?*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In God’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? <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know God also.”*

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A certain man died and went to heaven and was being given the grand tour by St. Peter. As they approached a particular room of the many-roomed mansion of heaven, St. Peter cautioned the man to be very quiet and, in fact, to walk tip-toe by the door. After they passed the room, the man turned to St. Peter and asked, “Why did we have to do that?” “Oh,” said St. Peter, “that’s the room for Christians. They think they’re the only ones up here!”

How many of us have known Christians like these – the we’re-the-only-ones-going-to-heaven sort? I’m guessing that most of us have. In fact, I used to be one of those Christians. I remember sharing my faith with kids at school, hoping they’d accept Jesus and find the assurance of a place in heaven. As a young adult, I took that message with me to Roma villages and orphanages in Bulgaria and to the predominantly Muslim slums of

Paris. From a young age, I took these words of Jesus very seriously, and very literally. When he said – “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me*” – I believed what he said, or at least I believed what I thought he said. Jesus claimed to be *the* way to God, right? I believed that if I genuinely cared about my school friends and about non-Christian people around the world, I needed to steer them toward Jesus, toward *the* way. This verse, more than any other, galvanized me to action. This verse is, at least in part, the reason missionaries evangelize unbelievers and Christians claim exclusive rights to the kingdom of heaven. And they do it not because they have some sort of Christ-mandated exclusivist agenda, but because they care – because they really don’t want non-Christians to end up in hell. The truth is, though, I no longer think that they will and here’s why: Jesus was answering a specific question – a question of the inquisitive Thomas.

This text is taken from Jesus’ farewell discourse – a conversation in the Upper Room that took place between he and the disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus was telling his friends goodbye, but he was also trying to reassure them that it wasn’t a “forever” goodbye, just a “for now” goodbye. “Don’t worry,” he says, “there’s room where I’m going for all of you and you already know how to get there.” But unsurprisingly, Thomas isn’t buying it. “How will we get there if we don’t even know where you’re going?” Jesus seems to know that he was about to die, but the disciples don’t get it. “I am the way,” he says, “I am the truth...” In other words, I think Jesus is saying that, “the truth is, live like me, live my way, and you’re going to get to where I’m going faster than you might want to!”

So, when the truth is that Jesus’ way ends in his own untimely death and the deaths of his closest friends, how is that way also “the life,” we may wonder? Jesus knows that loving people, eating with sinners, healing outcasts, upsetting the elite, and challenging the status quo is ultimately life-giving, even if it ends up getting you a one-way ticket to an early grave.

A quick look at Jesus' life reveals that he was no exclusivist, "he was an observant Jew, and yet he spoke and ate with all kinds of 'sinners,' including people of other religions, such as Roman soldiers, the Syro-Phoenician woman, and Samaritans, even when such actions clearly drew criticism among members of his own religious community. Often during his public ministry, Jesus exhorted his followers to 'love your neighbor as yourself,' and he sought out ways to demonstrate the importance of this practice. He believed that all people were children of God, and thus worthy of love and respect"<sup>1</sup> and that belief ultimately landed him on a cross. Jesus' way was love. That's the truth. Even if it meant that his life and the lives of his followers would be cut short, it was still real, abundant life. *The way, the truth, and the life is love and that is precisely where we can see God in Jesus and in one another, and nowhere else.*

It matters what we believe about Jesus and about God and about our Christian Faith. It matters how we read and understand the Bible and how we live our faith within the community of the church and in our wider world. Our confirmation students get that. For the past year they've asked tough questions of our faith and come to their own understandings of what it means to live like Jesus and call themselves Christians. And each of us, of any age, are constantly called to do the very same thing.

Far from the clobber text of Christian exclusivism, our text from John's gospel is meant to convey the radically inclusive nature of Jesus' way, truth, and life – love. The real question for Christians is not whether non-Christians are going to heaven. The real question for Christians is "Am I living Jesus' way? Am I living Jesus' truth? Am I living Jesus' life? Am I living Jesus' love?" If we are, we will certainly see God in *every* face we look into, we will hear God in *every* word shared between friends, and the very heart of God will beat in our own chest. That, friends, is life and life abundant. May it be so with us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, *God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), xxi.