

Room for Doubt  
A Meditation on John 14: 1 - 14

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May 22, 2011

Sometimes I feel so sorry for my big sister, Lib. Between the two of us there are 14 years and 2 brothers. My sister lived at home while attending what is now Rhodes College in Memphis. Living at home as a college student wasn't the end of the world, but it would have been much more tolerable if she hadn't had younger siblings to put up with, younger siblings who were a constant source of embarrassment and frustration! A sixteen year old brother who only wore white t-shirts, blue jeans and black converse All Stars. Every day. She was mortified. And on top of that she had me - a six year old baby sister who loved to get into her stuff. Her closet was my very own dress up paradise! To this very day, she never makes it back to Chicago with all of her shoes.

But at least there was eight year old Andy. Peaceful, thoughtful, Andy, who never bothered anyone, but quietly went about his business. Andy would disappear for hours, and then emerge, having built a scale model of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater from Legos, complete with water. How could you not love Andy?

And everyone did, until the day that Andy made Lib's life very complicated. We lived in your basic 1950's ranch style house. Long hallway with a bathroom at one end, hall closet at the other and bedroom doors along the way. The attic door was in the ceiling of the hallway. The kind with a chain that you could pull to unfold the steps. Andy must have been bored with Legos that day, because he had decided instead to see how he might use some of the ropes and pulleys from our father's workshop. How he accomplished what he did without anyone seeing him, I will never know. He somehow managed to connect all the doors along the hallway - four bedroom doors, 1 bathroom door, the door to the hall closet and the door to the kitchen - in such a way that when you opened one door another door would close. And he had run all the rope through the chain to the pull down attic stairs overhead so that you could still easily navigate the hallway.

Lib arrives home, running behind, and needing to get ready for a date. Do I need to describe the resulting chaos? She opens the door to come down the hall and she sees the door to her bedroom shut. She opens that door, and the bathroom door closes. She can't get in the bathroom without going back and closing the door to her room first. When she leaves the bathroom, the door to her bedroom shuts. I don't remember any of the terrible things she threatened to do to Andy that day. I think it wasn't long after this that she finally got to move out.

Sometimes the familiar way, that path we could navigate with our eyes shut becomes almost impassible, and like my sister trapped in the hallway, we literally don't know which way to turn when we encounter unexpected stumbling blocks.

Through the season of Lent we traveled forwards, anticipating the joy of Easter morning. The way seemed clear and unobstructed. With the women, we found the path to the empty tomb, and with Cleopas we left Jerusalem heavy hearted, but ran all the back from Emmaus to proclaim the resurrection message.

But today, the lectionary has us traveling backwards. In the Gospel of John, we are taken back to the upper room to revisit those troubling days before Jesus' death and resurrection. We remember Jesus' humility in washing the disciples' feet and are reminded of the depths of God's forgiveness when Jesus releases Judas to "do what he must." On this night, the disciples don't understand Jesus' words, much less his actions. Doors are closing around them, and the way that once seemed straightforward is now a maze.

When Jesus tells the disciples that he must leave them, and that they cannot follow, Peter balks. An impatient child, he wants to go NOW. And he wisely wants to go along with Jesus so that he won't lose the way. But like a loving parent, Jesus knows that it is not Peter's time. "Not yet," Jesus tells the disciples. "I have to go ahead and prepare the way." This is a journey Jesus must take alone, and ultimately, each must follow on their own. But before we can go, Jesus will first pass through death. Jesus will take the world's weight upon himself. As the door of life closes behind him, he will restore the relationship between God and God's children so that all may come home. **God, the eager host, awaiting long over due guests, sends Christ to make all things ready, sends Christ to make all things news.**

And once this painful work is done, the Son will go a step further. Christ will not sit back and wait for the disciples, wait for us, to find the way home, but rather Jesus says, "I will come again, and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14: 3B)

The disciples do not understand any of this. Thomas, unafraid to say what everyone in the room is thinking, says, "Lord, we do not know the way..." Thomas wants signs and arrows and an illuminated path beneath his feet, but Jesus responds, "You know the way because I am the Way."

Jesus is inviting them not to travel to a finite location, an ultimate destination, but to enter into an infinite relationship. We, like the disciples, hear the words "dwelling places" and can't help but imagine a physical reality. But that's not what Jesus is referring to. These rooms - the rooms to which Jesus refers - are

the home created by God's vast embrace. Jesus is calling the disciples to dwell within God's presence. Jesus, the servant at the door has knelt down and washed the disciples' feet to welcome them in, *not just to an upper room, but to God's house.*<sup>1</sup> Jesus, the host at the table, has broken the bread, *not just for a final meal with his friends, but for the meal that will be celebrated throughout eternity.*

His followers are so worried about getting to the destination, that they cannot see that they are already there, in God's presence. The Greek word John uses for dwelling places, *μονη*, is a derivation of the verb, *μενω*, which means "to remain or abide." This dwelling place isn't a place at all, but a mutual relationship, a mutual abiding. A relationship which can and will survive physical separation. A relationship which cannot fully exist until physical separation has happened. A relationship that transcends geography and chronology. Still, Peter asks "when are we going?" and Thomas says "how do we get there?"

But Philip is starting to get it. His request stands alone: "Show us. Show us the Father and we will... he doesn't say "believe," he says "*be satisfied.*" He already believes, but he longs to believe even more deeply. He says, "Show us the Father and it will be *enough.*" "Show us the Father and we will be strengthened. Philip wants that final proof that will wipe away all doubt, that proof that will remove the last barriers to discipleship. The proof is standing before him, but he cannot see it.

The patient Teacher, repeats the words he had just spoken. Philip needs to hear them again: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me. If you have seen *me*, you have seen the *Father.*" And like a wise teacher, he can tell that the disciples' eyes are glazing over, that they just can't take it all in. So Jesus says, "Begin with this. Begin with my *works*, the works that you have witnessed and know that those works originate in God. If you cannot see God in me, Christ says, see the movement of God's Spirit in the works I have performed. Don't abandon this relationship simply because you do not have all the answers.

Jesus speaks these words to the disciples to brace them for his absence. He knows they will make it to the other side, the dawn of Easter morning. But they know none of this. And so Jesus allows room, room for doubt and wonder. Because the Son of God knows that every time he tells them who he is, they encounter it as if they have never encountered it before.

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<sup>1</sup> Keck, Leander, E. *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 741.

I used to be so envious of the disciples, envious of the days they spent with Jesus. Not because of the miracles, although I wouldn't mind watching Jesus stride across the water or call Lazarus from the tomb, but because of the little things - like the sound of his voice or the shape of his smile. I was so sure that if I could have just seen him with my own eyes, I would never question. But truly it seems we have it easier than they. How hard it was to be a disciple. **To go from believing in a God whose face was hidden, to a God whose face was human.** After all what is more difficult, to believe in a God whom we cannot see or to believe in God embodied? As much as we cling to what is tangible, we, like the disciples, are sometimes tripped up by a God who becomes incarnate.

Will God incarnate be a cornerstone or a stumbling block? What do we do with that phrase that follows, "I am the way, the truth and the life," that phrase, "no one comes to the Father except through me?" Do we embrace Christianity as an exclusive path to God? For many, this is not simply a small stone to trip over, but rather a large bolder blocking the path. For exclusion seems to go against every good work Jesus has performed. Context is crucial and we must be careful here. Once again we are dealing with relationship. Note that Jesus does not say "No one comes to *God*, except through me." Jesus says, "No one comes to the *Father*, except through me... This might seem like splitting hairs. We are so accustomed to hearing God referred to in parental terms. But the relational distinction is what we must pay attention to. "[This] is the very concrete and specific affirmation of a faith community about a God who is known *to them* because of the incarnation."<sup>2</sup> *These* disciples, gathered in *this* room, cannot come to God except through Jesus. "These verses are the confessional celebration of a particular faith community, convinced of the truth and life it has received in the incarnation."<sup>3</sup> This is not a statement that should be employed to belittle or condemn others who do not follow in Christ's path. We do not know the mind of God.

So whenever the way seems hindered, when those doors are opening and closing around us, we must remind one another to go back to that starting point that Jesus offered his disciples: the witness of his liberating and restorative work, the work that we are called to continue. Jesus says, those who believe will do even "greater works" than this by the empowering of the Spirit. Christ is holding the door open for us. Let us walk through together.

And by the way, my brother became an architect. A few years ago he was asked to redesign the entrance and narthex of his church so that it would be a more welcoming space. No tricky doors there. And my sister? She became a very patient seminary professor who encourages her students to not to give up when they encounter stumbling stones along the way. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>2</sup> Keck, p. 744.

<sup>3</sup> Keck, p. 745.

Benediction:

From the moment Adam and Eve stepped off the porch (so to speak) God began scanning the horizon to welcome us home. And when God saw that the way was impassable, God sent Christ to remove every barricade. And after the barricades were broken, God sent the Spirit, to sustain us as we walk along this rocky road.

This is the good news of the Gospel. Let us claim it and go from this place to love and serve the Lord. Amen.