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John 14:1-14, Acts &:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

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Living Now in Light of Then

It's been a while since some of us were this little where we had to take someone's hand to cross the street. Do you remember? I was walking with my grandson on a sidewalk recently and he didn't want to hold my hand at that particular point. He's just 3. And then all of a sudden, something happened, and all of a sudden what happened? His little hand just went up like this (demonstrate) ! And all was good, why? Because he was holding my hand and I'm bigger. I thought, "What a great image." Thank you, Holly, for the music you chose which says that (Music piece sung: *I Can't Even Walk Without You Holding My Hand*, by Colbert Croft).

As we come to the New Testament lesson today, it's just one of the most wonderful passages in the Bible, one I've loved. I learned some things about it as I have studied it for today I'd never known before so I'm going to try to stick to my time frame and not get too excited. But it's really thrilling. I'm going to give you a brief introduction before we jump into John 14, as I think stories with context make more sense.

First of all, what a week it's been, thinking back to when I was last here in worship last week. There was a suicide in Billings. Leaflets about racial hatred distributed to some neighbors here. Any of you all in neighborhoods where that happened? I know Dan and Jody were. You think it happens elsewhere. but here?!? And then it's been an interesting week on the political scene in the United States. Each hour, what day was that, Tuesday? It's been a lot that's happened. Every hour or two I read something new or some new part of this of changing positions, decisions, interpretations and motives and recollections. And then what a last month it's been, China, North Korea, Syria, tragic deaths in Afghanistan, ongoing embroiled controversy and ugliness.

And then what a year! I was thinking back to what's taken place over the last year and a half in US politics. I don't know if two years ago many of us would've ever projected things we've seen the last two years. Has that hit any of you? And then, what's happening in your life and my life... there are all sorts of 'unexpecteds', disheartening things, 'oh my gosh. I can't believe that might be true' moments. What kinds of feelings do you have when that happens? This is not a rhetorical question, tell me a few feelings that you have or you observe in other people around you?

Congregation responds: Shocked, apprehensive, angry...

Certainly anxious and disheartened or disillusioned, thinking, "What, is that really reality?!?" I want to read you a few comments. Thomas Friedman, who distinguished himself particularly for writing the book *The World is Flat*, has written a new one, anybody seen it? It's big, but it's really profound and I'm not even part way through it. The book is *Thank you for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*.

He talks about the incredible rate of change that has us spinning and then what the nature of what some of that is. And he said, So many people [and he's referring to himself too] seem to be

looking for someone to put on the brakes or take a hammer to these forces of change. Or maybe to just give them a simple answer to make their anxiety all go away.” Friedman continues, “It's time to redouble our efforts to close that anxiety gap with imagination and innovation, not scare tactics and simple solutions that won't work.”

Dealing with anxiety isn't something that can just happen, (finger snap) Poof! as easily as we all wish! That's why what do angels always say when they show up? “Don't be afraid! Peace!” because they know that's the *last* thing we feel. I've never had one come see me but I'm sure that's what I'd feel. And so John 14 is Jesus talking to his disciples right after he's just told them a lot of very disheartening news. The chapter designations we have did not exist originally and this story we enter is Jesus's last testament, his farewell conversation from his heart to their hearts. When you say farewell we think of good bye! But if you take the word apart, the English really means my parting words so when I'm gone I pray you will *fare well*. So he's telling them some bad news and some good news. John 14 comes right after 3 bits of really bad news Jesus just gave his disciples in John 13. Number one, Peter, the one who says, “Oh Lord, never me, I'll follow you.” What does Jesus tell him? It must've broken his heart. He knew how eager Peter was. “I'll follow you.” “Peter,” Jesus says, “You're going to deny me 3 times before the cock crows.” Peter, who is the rock.

Number two, Jesus tells his disciples, “I'm going to leave you.” They've given *everything* and followed him *for 3 years*. “What? It's going to be over??!!” Number three, “One of you is going to betray me!” This is the inner circle. This is the unthinkable. Disheartening, discouraging, shocking, making them think, “What?!?” Peter is angry and agitated.

So Jesus says, “Don't let your hearts be troubled.”

I'm going to read you a version translated by Dale Bruner, a Presbyterian New Testament Scholar who taught at Whitworth University for years. I love what he does with this, trying to capture... there are all sorts of definite articles in the Greek and word order that we miss in English, and he tries to capture all these.

John 14:1 - 14. My disciples don't let your heart be too troubled. [I love it, he's realistic.] You're going to be a little troubled, but don't be too troubled, don't let it get you down. Trust in God! Trust in me too please. On my Father's estate, there are many homes. If this weren't the case, would I have said I'm going to prepare a place for you? And if I'm going to go and prepare a place for you [it's like making reservations] do you know what that means? It means I am coming back again to take you to myself so that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I'm going.

[Now who do we hear from at this point? Thomas. Jody's sermon on Thomas the week after Easter, if you didn't hear it, get the transcript online. It's very good about Thomas's mixture of faith and doubt. Because faith and doubt often travel together. Not always but often. So Thomas says he's so gutsy straightforward and honest.]

“Lord we don't have the foggiest idea where you're going so how could we know the way there?” Jesus says to him, I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you've come to know me you'll come to know my father as well. In fact from now on you do know him because you've seen him.

Phillip says [I wish I could see the facial expressions!] “Lord, please show us the Father, we won't ask for any more favors.” Jesus says to him [I love this. Every now and then you see Jesus thinking, “How long have I been at it and they still don't get it? And this is the launch team? If they don't get it, help!”] Have I been with you all this time, Phillip, and you haven't recognized me. The person who has seen me has seen the Father, so how can you say please show us the Father. What did you miss? What did I not make clear? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? Why even the words I'm saying to you, I'm not saying out of my own resources. No, the Father who makes his home in me is doing his works. Please believe me, I am in the Father, the Father is in me. But if you can't believe that, believe what you're seeing, all these works. [Feeding the 5000, raising Lazarus from the dead. Water into wine. People healed, blind people see and you could go through the whole Gospels. Then he sums up,] Amen and amen!

I want to tell you something very important. [The Greek word order has a sense of pay attention to this one!] An individual trusting themselves to me will do the very works I'm doing. In fact that person will do even greater works than I'm doing. I can tell you why, because I am going to my Father. And whatever you disciples ask me in my name, I'll do this *whatever* so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. I'll say it again, if you disciples ask for *whatever*... in my name [a big qualification,] I'll do it!

This is just amazing! Jesus gives them the bad news, unsettling, uncertain, how on Earth will we live? What if all the things that go through their hearts and minds, and ours today might happen? What is it in your mind and heart and life that is really uncertain right now? Is really disheartening and you just don't know. I think Jesus wants us to hear him say again, “Don't let your heart be *too* troubled.” He is not *denying* the reality of the tough stuff and the uncertainty. Jesus is the ultimate realist. It's not that it's not difficult or bad, but in your momentary human response, Jesus says but you don't have to stay there and have it overwhelm you. Why? You can trust in God and in me and then he says... when he says trust in God and trust in me, what does that do? Jesus stands there the Messiah, the culmination of what? Everything written and prophesied since the creation of the world.

[Pointing Behind] You know all the back story of who God is, what God's done and who he is. You know those places in the Bible where it reiterates all the things God did for the people and we're commanded to remember it. Tell the stories, recite it, keep reminding ourselves. Because sometimes our memories aren't so good. Think of all that's gone before. We are supposed to live *the now*, the uncertain *now*, the disquieting *now*, the disheartening *now*, in light of believe in God. Look at what all he is and what he's done. We recite it every week at Synagogue [the disciples in Jesus' time], we read it. We read the Psalms Jesus read and then Jesus says, and has been trying to explain His death to them, that he's going to be raised. He says it but they don't get it. It's not until afterwards they do. But what he then knows, what they can build their life on, is what he does.

But then Jesus does something else. He realizes that living the *now*, the disheartening, anxious, uncertain, disquieting things that happen living in a fallen world, when your mom and your wife get cancer... is just wrong. It's unfair. When people die. When you feel threatened. When people in government act and you wonder about their ethics, their motive, their competence and a lot of other things. You think, “God help!”

Jesus also knows we need to live these *nows*, and can do it best, when we see the *then* that's

coming, and not only the *then* that has been. I love it. It's as if Jesus says, "Okay, look. In the middle of all this, remember what's coming!" And he says "What? I am going to God, [and I love this one] "In my Father's estate there are many homes. It's the sense, the Greek word is this big, big, place that encompasses many families. Not just one. It's so broad and it's amazing. "Live now in light of what I'm promising, is the future reality that can change and reframe your present."

When I was learning to drive my father had very strong opinions about what I needed to learn and how I was to do it. Anybody else have some input from a parent like that? And he'd sit me down as I was trying to do my driver's ed thing. I grew up in the Washington D.C. area so my third driver's ed in the car, we went on the D.C. Beltway! It was one thing to drive my neighborhood and then I got out in the 4 lanes with the stop lights. But then the D.C. Beltway? I can remember my dad, bless his soul, said "Remember, periodically, I know you've got to look at what's right in front of you, but every now and then glance what's behind you. Look in that rear view mirror. If you don't know what's back here it could get you, because the car right behind you can just swoop out behind you. You don't know it's there in your blind spot." He gave me all the technical things about mirrors and blind spots. And I'm thinking, "Yes Dad," because I'm 16.

"Check in the rear view mirror," he said, "but remember you have to drive looking right in front of you and WAY down the road. "

Now that's a lot to think about when you're just trying to be sure your wheels don't go off this side or this side on the DC Beltway and the cars are going zoom, zoom, zoom. I'm thinking, "Okay!!!!" Yet, as my anxiety level lessened, I realized he was dead right. I can navigate some things in front of me more safely, if I also keep my eye periodically on what's WAY ahead. I'll never forget the day something fell off a truck, right in the lane I was in. Had I been doing my driving, only from here to the end of this sanctuary, I would've been in serious trouble because I couldn't miss the object now on my lane. But fortunately I was driving here [gesture right in front of me], and then WAY down the road, and I could see all this. Therefore, I had time to move out of my lane and avoid it.

So Jesus is saying in his last farewell testament of John 14-17 and, as he makes explicit in John 17, "Disciples, look. I'm not just saying and praying this for you disciples sitting here in Palestine before I go to the cross. I'm saying and praying this for *all those who are yet to come*". Jesus was looking down the road and saying this for *you and for me* as followers of Jesus NOW. We need to remember that the marvelous terminology that he uses, "I am the way, the truth and the life", is talking globally. It's fascinating when you start looking at other cultures, the terminology in a lot of Eastern spiritual understanding is the term that was used the most is... seeking *the way*, the *Tao*. What does Jesus say? Our faith is really as much an Eastern *way* even though we inherit it through a Western lens in history. "I am the way", Then you get to the Roman Greek tradition and then to Europe and Enlightenment and you get how we see things today in western thoughts and culture and there has been a lot of talk about, emphasis on *truth*. So you have East and West combined. Then, Jesus says "I'm life". The word for it is, I'm not just living breathing life. The word here is *life to the full*. It's got meaning, purpose and that *breath of the spirit*, that Hebrew *ruach* that's breathed into Adam and Eve. That's the kind of *life*.

Jesus says, "This kind of *life* is *in me*. I am the way. When you follow me, I'm going on ahead so you know the way. And when things get so disheartening *now*, remember I'm preparing a mansion *for you* in my big estate! AND I'm coming back. AND I am going to take *you* to where I am, that you may be also be with me." If you have to get a one sentence definition of heaven, it's the presence of and being

with Jesus. He talks about it here: where I am, where God is.

One of the other lectionary passages we don't have much time to read and dwell on in this service is the stoning of Stephen, the deacon, in Acts 7:55-60. When Stephen preaches... a wise, wise man elected by the people, preaches, the religious rulers are furious. What do they do? They drag him out and stone him to death. But in the process, Jesus, who recently said, "I'm going on a head of you... and you don't have to worry." Do you recall what Stephen sees as he's dying? The text says, "They were engaged and ground their teeth at him and then they start to stone him. But filled with the Holy Spirit Stephen gazed into Heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." How did they know? Let me tell you there were a few witnesses to this one! "Look!, Stephepn says. "I see the Heavens opened and the Son of man standing and the right hand of God!!!"

Jesus says, "I'll come back for you." Who does Stephen see when it's his time? He see's *Jesus*. And when he does that, his last sentence is, as he kneels down to keel over and die, "Lord don't hold this sin against them." Whoa! He sees Jesus and he epitomizes the grace of the Gospel.

I've been thinking a lot about Heaven and that *Way* that Jesus opens up, the more family and friends I have there. Do you ever think much about Heaven? I think we should. Because it's one of the ways Jesus helps us to know that we are going to live with power, courage and faith and all of the character of Christ in the middle of all the accelerated changes. When we see ahead to what's coming and the *then*, and *then live*. I can say to myself, "Okay Lord, this *now* isn't just what I'm seeing and getting *now*. There is so much more and I know where I'm headed and where the *end* of the story is.

My daughter, who teaches at MSU, came over for dinner this week and she's been carrying this book around. I'm fixing dinner and asked, "What are you reading?" She's not as prone to hyperbole as her mother is [laughs], but she said, "Mom this is amazing! It's called *Josiah's Fire. Autism Stole his Words, God Gave Him a Voice*. About a young boy who appeared very normal in his development. chattered and did all the normal little kid things. And just before he turned two, all of autism's worst symptoms erupted. He went unresponsive yet he had been talking. He went unresponsive, incommunicative and into extreme autism. That was the reality for 5 more years."

As his mom worked with therapists and all kinds of people, they eventually got him an ipad. He was learning things they'd found were very helpful. She was teaching him words. She was a pastor at Church, so he heard lots of Jesus stories. Not tons but he knew some and he knew about God. He got is ipad and one day she was trying to get him to type out. He could take his finger and start pecking. Now, he'd never been taught officially to read from humans. She had beenteaching him and puts letters like you would do with a 3 or 4 year old seeing if he could type...She had word, *heal* and *play* and she had a Bible story. He takes his ipad and he types out a sentence, "God is the good gift-giver" !!!

And Josiah starts to communicate!. That was the beginning of the most remarkable thing. This woman has been checked out really well. In this little boy's being locked in autism and unable to communicate, frustrated beyond belief, guess who he'd seen? He starts typing out stories about Jesus! She asks where he learned to read and write. And he types, "Jesus taught me". And he talked later about ways God had given him both dreams and visions and sometimes a chance to see. He wasn't distracted by the stuff you and are distracted by. And in his extremis, God showed him *Heaven*. Quite

remarkable, but it's just exactly what Jesus did with his disciples. Peter said. Well Lord, we're giving all this up for you", in Matthew 19. Jesus responds, "Yes, you are, but you're going to be with me and here's what I'm going to give you. You will have fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters, homes, amazing things even more than you've ever had here. I wouldn't have told you all this and said this if it weren't true. Believe it! But if you can't take it on faith and just trust, keep telling yourself what have you seen in the past? What *has* happened? Hang on to that."

The stories of faith. I want to end with this story of a woman that when I read this passage comes to mind. The stories of faith all through the Bible are the family stories the Hebrews recite. And, friends, in congregations of faith, we need to know the stories of faith in each other's lives, what's God doing in Holly's life. What's God doing in *your* life and share those, because we need those to live on them.

In the church where we were previously was Mabel Delong. Now Mabel Delong, I only in her lifetime referred to her as *Mrs.* Delong. Ever know people like that? She was a formidable, amazing woman, the first woman elder at First Presbyterian Church in Reading. And she was a great one to blaze the way and she deserved it. She and her husband, Howard had 3 kids, 8, 6 and 2. He worked at a bank in Reading. He came home one day, went up stairs early evening, collapsed in the upstairs hall, had a massive heart attack and was gone (snap) instantly, leaving Mabel with three kids.

Daughter, Emmy, who by the time we got to that church was well into her 50s, lived with her mom. As we got to know them, we heard the stories of what Mabel did as she raised 3 little kids by herself. Every night at bedtime when she put the kids together they did 3 things. First, she'd talk to them about her day, hear what their day was like and they'd do a free form prayer, praying for their friend on the playground, somebody who was sick and something they were angry about... If it was Christmas you know what they prayed about – what they wanted to get! So first they did the free form prayer. Then they would do the Lord's Prayer. But then as she tried to parent, to help this little two year old boy connect with his dad who is now in Heaven [and he hardly remembers him]. So, she said ..I'm going to tell them the story [John 14] every night so it's never far from them. Every single day of life, she recited John 14, this passage to them, EVERY SINGLE NIGHT. And they knew that their daddy was there with Jesus in this amazing place. And she'd say, even when we miss him we don't need to let our hearts be troubled. We can believe in God and believe in Jesus. He's the way and He is preparing a place for us and he will come and take us to himself.

Well, as the years went on, Mabel eventually developed bone cancer. She was in the skilled care section of the nursing home. Just before Easter she was about to die and her daughter that night said, "Goodbye." But they got called from the nursing station the next morning, "she's still here, come back." They hurried back over. Now she could literally barely move with pain and she was this far from going home. She was curled up there. They visited with her for a little bit. Then all of a sudden, she opened her eyes bright and said, "You'd better go now, they're coming for me very soon."

They looked around and there was nobody. They looked at each other like hmm. Next minute she goes, "Oh wait here they are now!" Her eyes opened and she looks, she's lying on her side and looks to the end of the bed and her eyes, her face is wide, she's watching people and following them walk down alongside her bed. Then she says, "Here they are now. Help me it's time to go!" And she moves and just goes like this holds up her whole arm. And you know what happened next? It makes me cry! She leaned back on the pillow and she was gone from her body on Earth. Jesus had come back for her. The same way, she had told her kids every day of life.

Friends, may you and I, regardless of what happens to us *now* or *whenever* in our pilgrimage, may you and I learn to live in our *NOW* in light of the *then*, of all God has done and been for us in Jesus Christ and the *THEN* that is coming because of Heaven. Amen!