

**August 3, 2008**

**Reading the Gospels Again: Dying and Rising With Jesus**  
**John 14: 1-7**

On Friday mornings during the summer, Jeff Van Dis and I have been meeting at 7:00 AM to bike-ride together. Those of you who know Jeff know that he is a real fitness buff. He is the tennis pro at the Battle Creek Country Club, gets lots of exercise and is in great shape.

The first few times we rode together we followed the same loop that took us from the Country Club southwest past Climax then circled around Portage Lake before returning along the highway on East Michigan Avenue. By the second ride, I knew the way that we were going. I knew how far it was. I knew how to pace myself. I knew when we had reached the half way point and how much energy I would need to hold in reserve in order to make it back to my house alive.

But this week, when we met for our ride, Jeff announced he was taking me on a different route that looped around through Pennfield. We headed north on Capital Avenue to the Linear Path and followed the Battle Creek River until we got to Bailey Park, and then we left the Linear Path and started zigzagging our way through residential neighborhoods I didn't even know existed. I was clueless about where we were or where we were heading. Without Jeff leading the way, I might still be on my bicycle today.

When I got home and Patrice asked me where we had ridden, I had to admit, "I have no idea. All I know is there were lots of hills and lots of traffic lights, all of which were red."

Knowing the way is important to us. It gives us a sense of confidence. It is comforting to recognize familiar landmarks whenever we are traveling from one place to another. It gives us a way of finding our bearings and anticipating what lies ahead.

Those who know me well know that I have a terrible sense of direction. In fact, our friends in Webster bought me a Garmen GPS device before we moved to Battle Creek because they knew I would be lost most of the time. I love my Garmen! There is a wonderful woman who speaks to me through this little device that sticks onto my windshield, and she tells me the way to go. She warns me ahead of time when there is a turn coming up so I can get in the right lane and adjust my speed. And if I miss a turn, she lets me know right away and gives me turn by turn instructions to get me turned around and headed back in the right direction again.

Today in our reading from John's gospel, Jesus' disciples were about to begin a journey they had never been on before. Their lives were about to take them in a direction that was new and unfamiliar to them. For the first time ever, they would have to find their way without Jesus. For the past three years they had followed him everywhere. But the conversation we read in our text today occurred on their last night with Jesus. It was his farewell speech. The disciples would no longer have Jesus next to them telling them what to do, encouraging them when they got overwhelmed, and correcting them when they veered off track.

Jesus began by telling them not to worry because he was going ahead of them to prepare a place for them, and he would return and bring them to where he was. And he assured them that they already knew the way but Thomas protested saying, "We don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?"

That is when Jesus gave the wonderful reply that has become one of the most beloved passages of scripture. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Now some people have yanked those words out of context and used the texts as proof to confirm their belief that there is no salvation for anyone who doesn't know Jesus. They argue that Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Seekers...are all condemned to hell because Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." If you want to get to heaven, you have to speak the magic words and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.

But that is not what the text is about. Jesus was giving his disciples directions for their journey. He was telling them the way to live faithful lives: "Follow the Way I've shown you. Live your lives the way I have lived mine. You know me, so you know my Father also. I am the way and the truth and the life. If you follow my way, it will lead you to my Father."

Back before Christians were called "Christians," we were known as "followers of The Way". In the New Testament book of Acts -the book that records the first few decades of the church before Christianity became a religion separate and distinct from Judaism - the disciples of Jesus were known as "followers of The Way." So what exactly is The Way of Jesus?

In his book, "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time," Marcus Borg points out that The Way of Jesus is the way of crucifixion and resurrection, of endings and new beginnings, of dying and rising again. That is the way that Jesus modeled for us. It is the way that he commended to us over and over again: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16: 24-25)

The way of Jesus is not a set of beliefs, but a way of life. That way - the path of dying to an old way of being, and being born into a new way of being - is the only way to God. It is the universal way, The Way known in all of the religions of the world.

But it is not a way that is easy for any of us. We like life to remain constant and unchanging. We like to preserve things the way they are. When I look in the mirror, I get distressed when I see more and more gray hair filling in around my temples. I groan inwardly when I see that my body doesn't look the way it did when I was a young man. I get discouraged when I realize that I can't do many of the things I used to be able to do.

We all know that life is an endless progression of endings and beginnings, but we always want to linger where we are just a little while longer. Last week, we could even hear Jesus wanting to linger a little longer before beginning the next leg of his journey of faith. When the wine ran out at the wedding feast in Cana his mother pressed him to intercede, but Jesus answered, "What concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come." He seemed reluctant to launch his public ministry. Maybe even Jesus wasn't eager to experience such an abrupt change in his life. He had lived the first 30 years in relative obscurity, laboring as a carpenter in the tiny village of Nazareth where everyone knew everyone else. He seemed reluctant to become a public celebrity, to attract the attention of strangers who would begin pressuring him with all of their expectations.

Even here in Christ's church, the way of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being does not come easy to us. We love to linger in the church. We love to preserve cherished traditions, rituals, programs, and activities. We have coming up the one-hundredth anniversary of our life here on this site, in this place. There have been many wonderful

experiences that have been shared here. There is good reason to want to linger and hold on to those traditions as long as we can. But the way of Jesus always invites us into a new way of life, a life that will be different from the past, but a life that holds the promise of new joy.

Most of us want to linger where we are a little while longer. We know our way around. We know how to function and survive where we are. Leaving all of that behind for a life that we have never experienced before is frightening.

But the way of Jesus is the way of unceasing endings and new beginnings, of death and new life. The promise of our faith is that there is always new life awaiting us. And even in the midst of all the uncertainty that comes with endings and new beginnings, we trust that Jesus will show us The Way.

“Do not be afraid,” said Jesus, “I am going ahead to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and bring you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.” Amen.