

John 14:1-14
April 20, 2088

South Plains
5th Sunday in Easter

Orientation Time

When I was starting high school, an older boy I admired encouraged me to go out for football. So, three weeks before school started, I showed up at the gym. I was issued a practice uniform and a locker. The other guys showed the newcomers how to line up for calisthenics. The coaches went over the training rules and reminded us to wash our shorts every week. Finally, they told us that the athletic bus would leave after practice to give us a ride home. By the time school started, I felt thoroughly oriented to the routine of heading to practice every day after school.

All went well until one day in late September, football practice was cancelled. The bell rang at the end of the school day, and I headed out the front door to catch my bus. Instead of my bus sitting at the curb where it let me off that morning, I saw at least 20 identical yellow buses with over 1000 kids scrambling aboard them. I was overwhelmed. By the time I walked down the line in a futile attempt to pick out my bus, the buses all began pulling away, leaving me dazed and lost. The one part of high school orientation I had missed was how to get on the school bus at the end of the day.

When Jesus turns to his disciples in the upper room and begins, "Let not your hearts be troubled..." this

is orientation time for his followers who will soon enter a new phase of discipleship without Jesus to walk beside them on the roads, without Jesus to point out the dangers of the world and without his instruction.

His orientation continues for four chapters, although the first fourteen verses are probably the most familiar because we hear them so often at funerals. I want to spend a little time on these verses because they are not only important for funerals when we are grieving a loss. Jesus wants to point his disciples in the right direction and get them ready for the rest of their lives. His words prepare us for a way of life that will at times be challenging and confusing, but it is a way that will lead us all the way safely home.

The anchor point for everything else he says is verse six: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This is a problematic claim for many of us today and I want to come back to the problems in a moment. But, first, we need to see the positive reassurance that this claim offers. The disciples of Jesus cannot know the details of the crucifixion which will take place within the next 24 hours. They do know that Jesus is in a very dangerous place. Anger at the teaching of Jesus has been building within the religious establishment. The city is awash with Roman troops.

And now Jesus is talking about leaving his disciples to prepare a place for them. Abandonment

issues arise right when they need him most. Thomas cuts to the chase: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Life is getting out of control for poor Thomas. He doesn’t understand what’s going to happen next; or why. And, he certainly does not like the idea of being left without specific directions.

Cell phones, map quest and GPS devices have habituated us to expect that we will never be completely lost. But we all know there are times when we may not be physically lost, but we are emotionally lost, intellectually disoriented, and spiritually at odds with the universe. Some twenty years ago, a dear friend, just a couple of years my senior, dropped dead of a heart attack. I remember leaving the house to run an errand that afternoon and finding myself wandering aimlessly around a shopping mall with no idea why I was there. Thomas senses trouble coming that he is utterly unprepared to face. “Where, Lord? How, Lord? What way are you talking about?”

When Jesus replies that he himself is the way, the truth and the life, Jesus is telling Thomas and us that we have the information we need. It’s not a matter of needing further directions. It’s a matter of trusting what we already know. Or, better said, it’s a matter of trusting the One we know. It is a hazard of the information age that we live with the illusion that collecting more data will insure our security. It’s not what we know, but whom we know. “If you know me, you will know my Father also,” says Jesus. Impersonal information can overwhelm us

like those twenty school buses overwhelmed me. Personal knowledge permits trust. Finding a friend gets us back on track. Finding the right friend gets us home.

We don’t know how Thomas reacted to Jesus’ comment. We know that one word caught the attention of Philip. Jesus promised we would know the “Father.” For Philip that would be enough. Regardless of what else happened, Philip was able to keep his eye on the goal, which is fellowship with God’s own self. His question is more simple and basic than Thomas’ worry about following Jesus. Philip says, “Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” It’s as if he is saying, “It’s not about getting to heaven, Thomas, it’s about getting to God. Show us God, Jesus.”

In the end, however, Philip is no more insightful than his friend. He also has missed the point. To know Jesus is to know God. To have seen Jesus is to have seen all we can possibly see in this life of God the Father. This is the great scandal of Christianity, the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the definitive revelation of God. This itinerant Jew with all the limitations of a first century peasant is our ultimate window on the nature of God. Despite spending months, perhaps years, with Jesus; despite learning more about the character of God than ever before; despite seeing miracles of healing, the people closest to Jesus still don’t get it.

We should not be surprised. The churches are full of worshipers, good people, well-educated Christians

who are still looking for something better than Jesus as their access to God. And, I do not mean to say that we here at South Plains are superior to other Christians. The truth is that we are all prone to look for something or someone better than Jesus himself. It's too simple, we suppose, to come to God through this Jesus we know so well from movies and stories in Sunday School. There must be some more explicit avenue to God, some key to religious faith we have not yet learned, some technique of prayer and devotion that will transport us into a holy place of absolute union with God.

“Have I been with you all this time... and you still do not know me?” “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Christianity is not a set of instructions, or a rulebook telling us how to behave, or a doctrinal standard requiring agreement with a series of propositions. Christianity is an encounter with a person who knows God well because Jesus is the window we can look through and see the nature of God. The parables and stories Jesus tells in the gospel tell us more about God than we can learn anywhere else. The example of Jesus' life demonstrates in a very concrete way both who God is and what God wants from us. Fellowship with Jesus means fellowship with God.

It is human nature, I suppose, to always want more. Jesus has given himself as the way to God. But, we want to use those words not only to guarantee our relationship with the Father, but also to make that relationship exclusively ours. We want to own Jesus so

that no one else can claim a relationship with God unless they come through Christianity as we know and understand Christianity. At our worst, we insist that other people use the same words we use or join the same church we have joined in order for us to verify their relationship with God.

When couples ask me to perform a wedding for them, I have learned to withhold judgment about the maturity of their commitment and the longevity of their marriage. Early in my career, a young man in the church presented himself and his fiancé for premarital counseling. As we talked, I felt certain that neither the groom nor the bride would be able to make that relationship work, much less make a go of marriage. But, the boy's mother was very active in the congregation and was so obviously elated with the match that I finally took a deep breath and agreed to do the wedding. Every Christmas for 38 years we have gotten a card from this couple, sometimes with a picture, and occasionally with a not so subtle comment such as, “Are you surprised?”

If marriages like that can be sustained by the Holy Spirit, who am I to say what kind of relationships God will bless. Every loving relationship comes brimming with mystery. Who am I to say that God will not reach out in Christ to those outside my experience and bring them to God's self. Every encounter with a real person is unique and quite wonderful. Every holy experience holds the potential for the Christ to transform that experience into a saving relationship.

The great thing about grace is that no matter how disoriented we may be, no matter how disoriented any unbeliever may be, grace can get us home. Jesus is the way.