



Meeting Jesus Again

THE WAY TO GOD

John 14:1-9

February 13, 2022

For some time, I have held on to an essay published in Christian Century magazine with the arresting title, “No Secret Plan: Why You Don’t Have to Find God’s Will for Your Life.” The author is Philip Cary, a theologian and professor at Eastern University in Pennsylvania, and he begins with an observation about how deeply anxious many of his undergraduate students seem to be these days. He writes, “They’re young, which means they have a lot of life ahead of them and a lot of big decisions to make. When they hear about the importance of discerning God’s will... they conclude that it’s not enough to...make good decisions about what career to pursue or whom to marry. On top of that, you have to figure out whether this is exactly the decision God has in mind for you. How do you figure that out?”

I, for one, can identify with the kind of anxiety Cary describes, and I think most of you can as well. In my experience, many of us have this persistent aching sense that we must determine *the* purpose for which we were created. And once we do, then we must spend every ounce of our energy and every moment of our time pursuing it. We can be paralyzed by the gravity of this decision. After all, what if you make a mistake? Does that mean you’ve missed your life’s calling? Here Cary has some good news. He says discerning God’s will for our life is not all that difficult. He writes, “If you want to know God’s will for your life, here it is: (from the prophet Micah) ‘He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?’” Cary contends the will of God for your life is justice, kindness and a humble walk of faith. Nothing more is required.

Really? That’s all? That’s it? Let’s grab brunch before the pregame shows start! Class dismissed.

Well...there is a bit more. Cary again, “Of course, what this verse has to teach us takes a lifetime to learn, but it will make a good lifetime—a life that honors God.”¹ So we might say that God’s plan for our lives is easy to discern and difficult to live. You might also say that this has always been true.

In this morning’s scripture from John’s Gospel, we are *overhearing* another encounter between Jesus and his disciples, but this one is different. The last three weeks we’ve explored these challenging, direct lessons of a Teacher, a Savior, and a Lord. Today, Jesus is speaking final words to his dearest friends. There is a reason you are most likely to hear these verses of John 14 at a memorial service or in a cemetery. Just before the text we read this morning, Jesus gathers his disciples for Passover, and after they have shared a meal together, he tells them something that takes them by surprise. He says, “Little children, I am with you only a little longer.” Stunned by these words, the disciples begin to awkwardly form questions. Peter, of course, is first. “Lord, where are you going, and why can’t I follow you there?” Recognizing the grief and fear that lie behind Peter’s voice, Jesus seeks to comfort his disciples. “Do not be afraid; let not your hearts be troubled. I am preparing a place for you. You know the way.”

Thomas is next in line to question this announcement. “Jesus, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Now, I don’t know about you, but I can *totally* relate to Thomas in this moment. Jesus has just shared heartbreaking, soul-shaking news. Thomas simply wants more

information. You see, Jesus has referred to a *place*. Thomas wants the coordinates. Jesus speaks of a way. Thomas wants a map. *Jesus, how can we know the way?*

I can imagine the grief in the voice of Thomas, and I like to imagine the look on the face of Jesus as he responds to this question. I think back to the Gospel of Mark when Jesus replies to a man who earnestly asks him how he might achieve eternal life. And Mark says, “*Jesus looked at the man and loved him.*” I think Jesus loved Thomas in this moment. I believe he responds out of this love. We know the words. *I am the way, the truth, and the life.* In other words, Thomas, the answer to your question is right in front of you. The answer has always been right in front of you. *I am the way to God.*

Now, unfortunately another disciple, Philip, chimes in next with his own question, and so we don’t know how Thomas responded. But I want to linger on that brief exchange. I want to pause in that intimate moment between Jesus and Thomas. I want to listen to those words spoken in love to a grieving and anxious friend.

Thomas, I am the way. We do a disservice to these words when we reduce them to some kind of secret plan of salvation, systematic theology, or definitive statement on comparative religions. I’ve heard these words used that way before. Maybe you have too. Here’s the problem. Such an interpretation turns the journey of faith into a forced march. This is the opposite of what Jesus does in replying to Thomas. You see, Thomas wants the forced march. He wants the step-by-step directions. He wants to know the secret plan, the passageway. And Jesus says, “*I am the way.*” Jesus says, “*Follow me.*”

I am aware that Jesus speaks another sentence. *No one comes to the Father except through me.* He speaks the words to friends in the grip of grief. He speaks the words to those preparing for an unthinkable loss. He speaks those words to ones who need to hear them most. Perhaps it will help to think of it this way. A child in need of reassurance asks his mother, “*Mommy, do you love me?*” “*Of course, son,*

I love all children” is not the most helpful answer. Jesus here speaks with the specificity of love in the intimacy of relationship. *Thomas, I assure you, no one—nothing this side of eternity—can separate you from my love.*

Let me be clear. I believe with all my heart that Jesus is the way to God. I believe that Jesus is the way to discover your purpose, to experience abundant life right now, and life eternal as well. When I read these words of Jesus to people gripped by grief, I believe I am speaking the gospel truth. Do not be afraid. Let not your hearts be troubled. Jesus has prepared a place for you. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

I believe with all my heart that Jesus is the way, the path, the road to God. I believe this not because I have explored every other path and found each lacking in some consequential way. I believe it because the words of scripture, the community of faith, and the witness of Jesus have always provided a compelling and inspiring path for me. I resonate with the words of a friend who says, “*The truth is that I didn’t choose Christianity, it chose me. As a child, I learned from my parents and Sunday school teachers that God loves me and values me. At the baptismal font I discovered a God who knows my name and claims me as his own. It has always been easy for me to dance with the one who brought me.*”

Still, my lifelong experience in the Church has often left me wishing we followers of Jesus would spend *less* time obsessing over secret plans, litmus tests, lists of names, and final destinations and a little more time focused on the way of Jesus. So, let’s ask ourselves: *What is the way of Jesus?*

Perhaps it would help to start with what it is *not*. It is *not* a highway to heaven, an unobstructed path from one glory to the next, an arrow-straight, crystal-clear route. It is *not* a road of smug superiority or self-righteous judgment. It is not a secret passageway to permanent pleasure. The disciples would soon learn this in their own experience, and you will too.

I think of it like this. Our son Ben has gotten very

interested in mazes in the last few months, so Sara and I have been buying activity books filled with meandering paths, crossroads, tangled webs, switchbacks, spirals, labyrinths, and tough choices on which direction to go. The way of Jesus seems to me more like a maze than an interstate. We can't always see what's just ahead of us. Sometimes we have to retrace our steps and start all over. Sometimes, like Ben, we get frustrated. Sometimes we need an eraser. Sometimes we need to ask for help.

But hear this, my friends—the way of Jesus is more than aimless wandering. We have a guide through the maze of life. We don't need to know what the next stage of our journey might bring. We need only to trust the one who says, "Follow me. I am the way."

When we trust in him, our life begins to resemble his. When we trust in him, we will seek justice. When we trust in him, we will practice kindness. When we trust in him, we will walk with humility and grace. When the night is dark and the path is unclear, we will keep walking. When the road twists and turns, we will keep following. When we reach a dead end, we will keep hoping.

Like the disciples, we are a people familiar with grief. We are acquainted with anxiety. Like the disciples, we want more. We want more information. We want a clear plan, the coordinates, a roadmap, step-by-step directions. Like the disciples, we are tempted to stop right where we are, huddled in terror over what may lie ahead. I've heard those temptations right here. *We can't change now. We have too much invested in the status quo. Why all this change? We have to preserve what we have. We need to go back to the way things were. We are a conservative church. I'm afraid of losing what has meant so much to me. Do we have to talk about **that**? Must we go **there**?*

I get it. This living in the way of Jesus is difficult. Sometimes we have to retrace our steps, change our perspectives, hold our tongues. And sometimes we have to get out the eraser. Sometimes we have to step out when we aren't quite ready, lean forward, let go, trust God. Thomas wanted a journey free from all

mystery. He wanted that map pointing to the place Jesus was going to prepare for him. He wanted to get there efficiently. Most of all, Thomas wanted a *place*. Jesus offers a *way*.

Listen, the truth is I have no interest in being a conservative church or a liberal church. Those categories are far too small for what we are about here. We are called to be a faithful church. A church on the move. A church for the world. And, if we stand still, if we are paralyzed by the ubiquity of uncertainty and frozen by our risk-phobia, we will lose sight of Jesus who is already down the maze ahead of us. But if we put our faithful foot forward and journey on, the promise will prove true over and over again. It has always been right in front of you. And you know the way. Amen.

ⁱ Philip Cary, "No Secret Plan," available at <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-09/no-secret-plan>