

## **“How Can We Know the Way?”**

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*<sup>1</sup>Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.”*

*<sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”*

*<sup>8</sup>Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”*  
(John 14:1-14)

For very good reasons, this passage from John’s gospel is one of the most frequently read scriptures at a funeral. In my pastoral experience, it is the number one choice. And why is that?

One reason is that these words of Jesus come at a moment when he is saying goodbye to his friends and family. These chapters in John are often called “the Farewell Discourse,” because they describe the final hours before Christ’s arrest and crucifixion. This was the last chance Jesus would have to prepare the disciples for his imminent departure. So, this passage resonates with people who are enduring the pain of saying goodbye to a loved one.

In that context of grief, this passage also offers great comfort. “*Do not let your hearts be troubled,*” Jesus says. “You will be alright. I am leaving, but you will always have a place with me, and you will see me again.”

A great part of that comfort is the vision Jesus shares of life after death. “*In my Father’s house,*” he says, “*there are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you... [and] I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also.*” So you can see why this passage makes a wonderful choice for a gathering of people who are grieving a painful loss, people who are worried about what is to come, people who likely feel completely lost, not knowing which way to turn, which way to go next.

Thomas, who was clearly the best listener in the group, and probably the most analytical one of the twelve, gives voice to the sense of desperation and panic that was welling up in the disciples as Jesus said his farewell. What set him off was something that Jesus said to be comforting. “*You know the way,*” Jesus told them. “*You know the way to the place where I am going.*” Like a good coach or mentor, Jesus wanted his disciples to feel



prepared.. to feel confident that when times of decision came they would know what to do... that they would know the way forward.

Thomas wasn't buying it for a second. "How?" he protested. "We have no idea where you are going. How are we supposed to know how to follow you? How can we possibly know the way?"

We all know how this feels to one degree or another. Maybe it was the sudden death of someone we dearly loved... maybe it was a cherished relationship that fell apart... maybe we lost our job or received a scary medical diagnosis... or maybe a dream we have been clinging to for years finally ends, and a long-held hope slips from our grasp. Whatever may cause it, we all know how it feels to be wracked with self-doubt... to be paralyzed with doubt, indecision, or fear, without the first clue about what to do next. Most of know what it is like to feel completely lost.

If you know that feeling, then these comforting, reassuring words of Christ fall upon us like a healing balm. In these words we find three practical strategies that anyone can follow, strategies that can help us find our way when do not know which way to turn.

The first is simple: we are to **follow Christ**. When Thomas pushes back and asks "How can we possibly know the way?" Jesus responds "I am the Way." In other words, "You know the way, because you know me. For three years you have been following me. You have heard me teach. You have seen me heal. You have been with me as I confronted injustice and practiced compassion. You know the way, because who I am, and what I do, that is the Way."

People have poked a lot of fun at the acronym WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? But the truth is that there is a lot of wisdom in it. The typical response to that sounds a lot like something that Thomas would ask, "How are we supposed to know that? We are fallible and human... How are we supposed to know what Jesus would think or what Jesus would do?" But the truth is that we are not flying blind on this. Scripture paints a very accurate picture of what Jesus did, what Jesus said, and how Jesus responded to all kinds of human situations. In fact, the strategy of imitating Christ in our own living has been a foundational teaching of the church for as long as there has been a church. Pretty much everything the Apostle Paul ever taught about ethics is built upon what he wrote in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 11: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the mystic Thomas à Kempis expanded this idea in one of the most enduring treatises in Christian history, which he titled *The Imitation of Christ*. He begins the work by quoting Christ's own words in the gospel of John: "He who follows Me walks not in darkness," says the Lord. By these words of Christ we are advised to imitate His life and habits, if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart. ... [W]hoever wishes to understand fully the words of Christ must try to pattern his whole life on that of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

So, the first thing we can do when we feel lost is to try our best to imagine what Christ would do under the circumstances. But if that feels too lofty, or a bit out of reach, there are other things we can do. One is to **follow the people**. Not just any people, but people of faith, people of character, people we trust as those who, like us, are earnestly trying to walk

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:1.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, quoted at <http://www.learning-living.com/2016/12/thomas-kempis-who-wrote-imitation-of.html>.

the right path and do the right things. Fred Rogers gave an example of this in a lesson he learned as a child. “My mother used to say... whenever there would be a catastrophe... in the movies or on the air... she would say ‘Always look for the helpers. There will always be helpers on the sidelines.’... If you look for the helpers, you’ll know that there’s hope.”<sup>3</sup>

An example from my own life is the decision I made to accept the call to become the pastor of Larchmont Avenue Church. During the first year of my ministry here, I mentioned a very memorable sermon I had heard my minister Joe Mullin preach when I was young. The title of that sermon was “Now That I Know You Better,” and it was one of the last ones he preached before his retirement. The sermon some amazing details about his call to the church – how, in a time when he had felt lost and stuck, God had pointed the way he should go. But he wanted to save those precious details for a time when he knew us and we knew him better. In my first year here in Larchmont, I stood in this pulpit and pledged to you that there were some things that I wanted to share with you about my time of discernment, when I was trying to decide whether to come up North and be your pastor. But, like Dr. Mullin, I wanted to save those details for a time when we knew each other better. I want to reaffirm that promise to you today. Today is not the day, but I will give you a hint. When I made the decision to accept the call to this church, I did not know you... but I did know the nine members of your Pastor Nominating Committee. And I am here, in large part, because I saw and felt something special in them, and I decided to follow the people.

Which brings us to the third strategy, and that is to **follow your heart**. Even if you cannot figure out what you think Christ would do in a certain situation... even if there are good people around you but you still feel lost and unsure of what’s next... God has given you eyes to see, ears to hear, and a conscience to be your guide. I definitely think this is one of the things Jesus was getting at when he told the disciples that they knew the way. He knew them, and he knew their hearts, and he knew that, when push came to shove, they would make good decisions. Not every time. Not perfectly. But Christ trusted them. Even with the betrayal of Judas coming. Even with Peter’s denial coming. Christ had chosen these men to be the foundation of the church that was to come.

And I do think that, deep down, we know what is right. I believe that most people, when they look at the world and what is happening here in our country and all around the world, they know when something is fundamentally right, and when it is fundamentally wrong. And again, this goes back to Christ. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” he said. If we want to know the way, we look at Christ. If we want to know the truth, we look at Christ. If we want to live the right way, the best way, we look at Christ. And even if we still feel a little stuck, we trust our heart and make the best decision we can.

I have shared with you before that I keep a simple prayer on my desk, right in front of me, where I see it every day. Written by the mystic Thomas Merton, it is the voice of someone who is stuck, someone who is lost, someone who is asking God to help them find the way. It goes like this...

*“[Lord,] I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.*

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<sup>3</sup> “Fred Rogers: Look for the Helpers,” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LGHtc\\_D328](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LGHtc_D328)

*I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always though  
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”<sup>4</sup>*

Even when we are stuck... even when we feel lost... the Word of God remains the same. “*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*” Follow Christ. Follow good people. Follow your heart. And you will find your Way.

***Amen.***

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<sup>4</sup> <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/merton-prayer>