

A PLACE PREPARED

A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE
SUNDAY, MAY 18, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

JOHN 14:1-14

The fourteenth chapter of John's gospel is one of the deepest and richest chapters in the entire Bible. It is Jesus' final words to His disciples, to those gathered in the Upper Room, on the night of His betrayal. It is, in essence, His final address to His troops.

When I was studying American history, we learned the final addresses of both George Washington and Robert E. Lee. As a boy, I remember hearing General Douglas McArthur's famous speech which ended with "old soldiers never die, they just fade away."

There are volumes compiled of the last words of famous (and infamous) persons. And, of course, there are services devoted each year to the Seven Last Words that Jesus spoke from the cross.

John 14 stands above all of these, even the Seven Last Words. I could preach the whole summer on just the first fourteen verses that I have read to you this morning.

I have chosen to focus on one of the promises that Jesus made to His disciples, one that is perhaps the most important part of this passage. Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself."

I have read those words at countless funeral and memorial services over the last forty five years. I'm pretty sure that I've never conducted a funeral in which those words did not appear, except for the service for two dear Jewish friends, Manny and Sarah Applestine, where I co-officiated with Rabbi Israel Kollar.

To know that there is a place prepared for us, a habitation not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, gives hope and confidence in this life as well as for the next.

We Presbyterians, in our Brief Statement of Faith, begin by saying that in life and in death we belong to God, and end by saying that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is one thing to know that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with us. It is quite something else again to know that He has prepared a place for us.

Remember those Motel 6 commercials from radio, with Tom Bodette, that ended, "We'll leave the light on for you"?

A few years ago, my late brother Robert made a photograph of our mother's house on Northshore Drive in Knoxville, Tennessee. The picture was made on a snowy Christmas Eve. The lights of the Christmas tree could be seen through the picture window. The front porch light shone brightly, and the ground was covered with snow. Robert titled the picture, "We'll leave the light on for you."

In the years since that photograph was made, my mother sold that house, and it was torn down, and condominiums now stand on the spot. My mother has gone to the place prepared for her, and so has my brother, Robert. But because of what Jesus said in that Upper Room so long

ago, I know that there is a place prepared for me. That Jesus has left the light on for me. I don't know if there will be a mint on the pillow, or a cookie on the bedside table, or if the covers will be turned back, but I know there is a place prepared for me, where when I come to the end of a long journey, I will find rest for my soul.

And this I also know: there is a place prepared for you as well. Each of us who has placed our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, each of us who has chosen to follow Jesus, each of us who has answered His call to discipleship, has a place prepared for us, and He will come again, and take us to be with Him.

I think I've shared this with you before. It won't hurt to share it again. Someone might not have been here the last time I told these stories.

The first story took place in Delta Medical Center, in Greenville, Mississippi. Mary Jacobs, the matriarch of the Leland Presbyterian Church, was in the intensive care unit, not expected to live long. The cardiologist described her heart as "a bowl of jello". But she did live, for several weeks. And every time she'd have a chest pain, or a flutter, or an arrhythmia, she'd tell the nurse, "Call my preacher, I'm dying." And they'd call me, and I'd jump in the car and make a fast run to the hospital, twelve miles away. Got to where I could do the twelve miles in nine minutes. Also got to where the Mississippi Highway Patrol gave me an escort rather than a ticket!

I don't know how many runs I made to the hospital, but one afternoon, when I'd made just a leisurely trip over to check on Mary, she pointed over my shoulder, and asked, "Ted, do you see Jesus?" I looked over my shoulder, and saw a picture of Jesus, kneeling in the garden in prayer, on a get well card that someone had sent to Mary.

"Yes, Mary, I see Jesus right there in the picture on the card."

In disgust, she said, "Not that! Jesus is right there beside me! He's coming to take me home." I said, "Yes, Mary, He'll come some day for all of us."

"Well He's here for me today!"

Her family who were gathered there in her room and I laughed. I said a prayer and left, and shortly afterward, Mary went to sleep. Her family went home, to be called shortly before midnight to be told that Mary had gone with Jesus to a place prepared for her.

Jesus came, and received her unto Himself. And where He is, there she is also.

A dozen years later, Hugh Rushing, Elder Emeritus of the First Presbyterian Church of Arcadia, was in an intensive care unit in the hospital there. His beloved wife of more than fifty years, Pauline, was with him. Hugh looked over her shoulder and said, "Pauline, the Lord has come for me, and it is time for me to go." Shortly thereafter, he, too, fell asleep, to wake up in that place prepared for him.

I have the testimony of two saints, that at the time of their dying, on the day of their death, they saw Jesus, come for them, to receive them unto Himself, to take them to that place prepared for them.

But you know, I didn't need their testimony. I didn't need witnesses. I didn't need proof. I am content in what Jesus said. I believe it with all my heart: that there is a place prepared for each of us.

I do not speculate what that place will be, what it will look like, what our accommodations will be.

I've stayed in the Motel 6. I've stayed in the Inn at Biltmore. I've stayed in a former royal palace in Switzerland. I've camped out many a night in a tent. I'm content to know that there is a place prepared for me, and that the one who is the Light of the World has left the light on for me.

And to Him be the power and glory, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more. Amen and amen.