

## Welcome

I was my high school biology teacher's worst nightmare.

Not because I was good at biology - I really wasn't. But because I walked in on the first day of class and warned him, "If you're going to teach evolution, we're going to have problems."

And sure enough, on the day it came time to teach Evolution, I was locked and loaded. See, my church had prepared me to go into my public school ready to defend my faith! It's what Christians call 'apologetics', which for me growing up meant being able to out-argue all the atheists and scientists I encountered. I had to defend God's honor.

The only minor complication was that my science teacher was also a Christian. I can still remember the pained look on his face as he taught biological evolution to our class as I sat loading my rhetorical clip with all the ammo my church had sent me with.

At the time, I saw myself as a righteous warrior. I was preaching God's Honest Truth to my class, holding back the tide of godless lies flooding out of our textbooks and off the chalkboard.

It never occurred to me to wonder why my classmates didn't seem grateful, why none of them seemed even the least bit curious to meet this God I was so stridently defending.

It never occurred to me to wonder whether *God* found my defense particularly helpful.

I want to talk a little bit about apologetics today, about how Christians go about defending our faith. Because if you look around, or listen to some of the loudest Church leaders, you'd think our sole mission is to stand against a sweeping tide of secularism and pluralism and fight back.

But today, we'll see that approach is all wrong. God doesn't now nor has God ever needed us to *defend* anything. And if there's any account we are to offer the world, it's a self-sacrificial, vulnerability that invites those outside the faith to come closer to God. Today, we're going to find a vision for how we interact with our friends, neighbors, coworkers and family who don't share our faith. That way is grounded not in combat and suspicion, but in grace and humility.

## Message

Welcome to the Sunday after Easter! Last week we celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the inauguration of a whole new reality - an eighth day that breaks out of the cycle of old for something altogether new. For the next several weeks, we're exploring Jesus famous "I Am" statements in John's Gospel. "I Am" is a translation of Yahweh, the name of God. For Jesus to claim, "I Am" was to announce his divinity. And in John's Gospel, he offers several statements that further refine what kind of God he is. Last week, we saw what it meant for Jesus to say, "I am the resurrection". We'll hear in this series that "I am the Good Shepherd", "I am the light of the world" and more.

We're calling the series Monday Messiah because Jesus' statements are all about basic necessities - they were features of mundane, ordinary, everyday life in Ancient Israel. So we're asking what Jesus' new reality looks like in *our* mundane, ordinary, everyday world. How does this new Jesus-life matter not here on Sunday, but tomorrow, when we're back into our daily lives? How can we experience the newness of God's life on Monday, Tuesday and beyond?

[Scripture Slide 1] So today, turn with me to John 14. Today, we're going to hear Jesus claim, "I am the way, the truth and the life." This is one of his more controversial statements - the one in which he claims to be the only way to God. Jesus makes this statement during the Last Supper - though his disciples don't realize it, he's about to leave them by way of the Cross.

Right at the beginning of this passage, there's a verse that's one of the most mis-understood in the whole Bible. Jesus talks about his Father's house having many rooms (the old King James version actually used the word 'mansions'). If you've ever heard that when you die, you go to heaven and live in a mansion, that idea comes from a mis-interpretation of this passage.

In Jesus' day, God's House was the Temple. Over and over in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms, the Temple is referred to as the House of the Lord. So when Jesus talks about his 'Father's House', he's not talking about Heaven, but the Temple.

What makes it all a little bit more confusing is that in John's Gospel, Jesus claims that *his body* is replacing the Temple. (If you were here during Lent when Jesus cleansed the Temple, you may remember that he said, "Tear this Temple down and I'll raise it in three days", and there he was talking not about the Jewish Temple, but his body.

It makes sense because the Temple was where Heaven and Earth connect, sort of like the airlock between the two realms. But Jesus is God and Human. He's the spot where God and Humanity overlap and become one. So let's read what Jesus says together, and keep in mind that his "Father's house" is actually his body.

It'll be weird and confusing - you'll really empathize with the poor disciples. But I promise we'll make sense of it by the end:

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. And you know the way to where I am going.”

“No, we don’t know, Lord,” Thomas said. “We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.” -- John 14:1-6

Jesus is *not* saying here, “I’m about to go to Heaven and build a mansion for you.” That’s how many of us who grew up in the Church have heard this verse used. But that reading ignores the context of early Judaism - where the Temple (not Heaven) is God’s House, and the context of John’s Gospel, where Jesus’ body is the new Temple. And in this moment, where Jesus is going is to the Cross.

So Jesus is saying that it is by dying that he is making space for us in his body. We are welcomed into the family of God (become members of God’s house) through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

That point is made more explicitly in a story of the resurrection. Jesus has appeared to a number of the disciples, but one of them, Thomas, wasn’t there. (Thomas is the same one who asked Jesus what the way was.) Thomas had a hard time believing they had really seen Jesus. Let’s read the story, and pay particular attention to the role Jesus’ crucified body plays in the story:

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. They told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “I won’t believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.”

Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don’t be faithless any longer. Believe!”

“My Lord and my God!” Thomas exclaimed. -- John 20:24-28

It is the very crucifixion wounds that convince Thomas of Jesus’ identity. Forever after, he will be not just the Messiah, but the crucified Messiah. Not just God, but the Crucified God. And (literally in this case), in Jesus’ crucifixion wounds, Thomas finds a place in God’s family.

Because Jesus is the Way to enter into God’s household.

We belong in Jesus’ body, and it’s through Jesus’ body we get there.

So isn’t that exclusive? Saying that Jesus is the only way?

There’s certainly a way of being religious that would not only claim exclusivity but celebrate it. There’s a way of being religious that emphasizes the differences between us and them. A way that elevates my

way over your way. This way of being religious builds walls between us, carefully dividing the world into right and wrong, good and bad, in and out.

It can sound like this is what Jesus is saying - as though he's the guardian at the gates of Heaven, hand out and insisting that "No one comes to the Father except through me."

Except if that's our picture of what's happening here, we've got John's picture of Jesus all wrong. John's Jesus is the light who has come into the world *from the Father*. We're all stumbling around in the darkness of sin, unable to see the way to life. And God himself becomes one of us *so that we can see*. God comes to us so we can find God. God *dies* for us so we can be adopted into God's family.

This isn't about Jesus bouncing at the most exclusive club in town, keeping all but the holiest of rollers from coming in. This is about Jesus being the one who comes to rescue us, to save us from our own darkness. The question is not, "Will God let us in?" The question is, "Will we let God in?"

Will we accept the crucified God as Lord of our lives? Will we, like Thomas, kneel before this broken-yet-raised Messiah and declare, "My Lord and my God?"

Christians spend a *lot* of time worrying about who's in and who's out. But nowhere in the Gospels is Jesus worried about this. In fact, Jesus is normally hanging out with the people everyone thinks *aren't*, which puts him in conflict with people who are policing the borders.

Jesus was constantly going out of bounds to be a living invitation to those around him.

And we are called to be the same. It's no accident the early Church called itself the 'Body of Christ'. We're Jesus' body on the earth. And just like Jesus' body was wounded, vulnerable, so too are we called to be.

What does this look like? At minimum, it means we quit building walls between the Church and the world. It means we quit rushing to defend the faith (as though Jesus needs you or me to defend him).

The world will not be 'won' for Jesus, as though faith is some sort of contest. Rather, it is by our self-sacrificial, loving relationships we invite people into the life Jesus has for them.

In high school, I won a lot of arguments, but I didn't win anyone to faith. Arguments don't really work like that. These days, I don't argue much about Christianity. That's not to say I don't have any answers (I know quite a bit more now than I did in high school, I promise!). But these days, I find myself listening more. I try to make the assumption in every conversation that what the other person has to say is more important than what I have to say. (That's hard for me. It's a habit I'm developing, a practice I'm cultivating.)

This simple conversational habit is one that works in person or online: ask questions and listen. Speak less. Make understanding your main goal (not making your point). This is a way of being vulnerable. Putting someone ahead of yourself. Seeking understanding is by definition opening your mind and your heart to others.

And yet time and again, I have had better, deeper, richer spiritual conversations when I have chosen to be vulnerable. I have invited people again and again along the journey of faith much more often than when I chose to defend my faith or fight for Jesus' name.

Claiming that Jesus is the Way to God was never meant to be a wall around an exclusive club. When Jesus said, "I am the way," he meant it as an invitation to us and to the whole world. When we say Yes to that invitation, we become part of Jesus' broken body. We become a people who turn back to the world and, along with Jesus, offer ourselves as an invitation saying, "Come with me. I found the path to life."

Jesus invites us to be vulnerable. This is how Jesus made space for us in God's house - not by fighting us, but dying for us. So too we are invited to be the very embodiment of God's rescue to the world around us. God *sends us* into the world to invite the world to God. Not by defending, but by the exact opposite: loving sacrifice.

#### **Communion + Examen**

The Communion meal teaches us how to give ourselves in love. Will you be broken open? Will you be poured out?

#### **Assignment**

Where can you be vulnerable this week? Who needs to be heard?