

## “MOVING ON UP”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.  
April 24, 2005

Sermon Text: John 14:1-14

Now sometimes when I struggle with a text in the privacy of my little desk and area with commentaries electronic, and in actual printed books near me and with my computer Bible in many translations, sometimes I convince myself that this is the most profound, this is the most insightful, this is the deepest, simple explanation of God's truth I have ever done, and then when I begin to preach it, I see everybody out there with an expression on their face that sort of says, "Go what?" I hope that you'll stay with me, and I hope it's not one of those moments.

I may have told this story before that I'm going to open with, but I'm going to tell it again. It made such an impression on me and on my friend, Mark. When I was about 12 years old, I used to wonder which things were true and which things were not true, and I remember there was a great big warning label that said "Danger" on the black powder can, on the black powder can that my father kept for his old musket. It said "Danger." I wondered just how much danger, just how bad can it be because I had played with other gun powder. He reloaded bullets mostly for target practice, not really for hunting that much. He was on the rifle team in college. He was big into accurate target shooting. Well, I would get little bits of different sorts of powder, and I would put a match on it, and it would go poof! I would note which did this and which did that. I had heard the rumor that black powder was an entirely different animal. Much more explosive, much more dangerous as the label plainly said, and I wanted to know if that was true. So I got this medium-sized pile of black powder, and being a cautious 12-year-old seeker of truth, I handed the matches to my friend, Mark, and stood back. Well, when Mark got close, not even on top of it, but just close to the black powder, it went poof and boom all together, and after the cloud of smoke cleared, and I could see his face, what I could see was that his face was red like sunburn and his eyebrows were gone! I don't recommend this, young boys. I saw from a safe distance that it was true what they said about black powder, but, and here's the point, and I hope that it sticks with you, it was TRUER for MARK. It was much truer for Mark. He knew about it personally. Truth doesn't matter until it matters to us personally.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." That is meaningless unless and until Christ becomes my way and my truth and my life. Abstract knowledge is one thing. It's another thing when you sit next to the bed of someone that you care about deeply, who is dying too young, in too much pain, with too many things undone, and you wonder what happens next. It is the personal truth, truth mixed with mystery and either trust in God or despair, for there is nowhere else to turn where we are confronted with faith. There is a great difference between thinking, "Oh yes, Christ is the way and the truth and the life," as words and saying, "My truth, my way, and my life."

## “Moving On Up”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 24, 2005

2

I have studied in depth, through Duke and through Wofford College, all the major religions and quite a few of the minor upstarts and even cults. It was sort of a hobby of mine and part of my way back into Christian faith because I did not really claim Christian faith as my own until college. I was brought up in a Christian household, but it wasn't my own way, truth and life until college. There are logical ways and there are leaders and there are geographical locations that are blessed by this or that group as holy and godly, but there is no one like Jesus. There is no place quite like with God, which Jesus describes. Jesus, who never raises an army, even though his followers thought that he might and should, Jesus who never accepts political power even though his followers thought that he might and should, Jesus who speaks about trust and the creator God even as he is condemned to death. Jesus, who is despised for his love and his compassionate nature. Jesus, who forgives even those who nailed him to that cross as he was dying on that cross. There is no one quite like Jesus. Throughout it all, we begin to notice, if we notice at all, that such a loving, kind, compassionate man is treated horribly and cruelly by the very people he came to save. Think how people of the world revealed their sin, their selfishness, their hollow, empty wandering lostness by the way they related to him. How separated they must have been from God to treat Jesus this way. Jesus revealed God's nature, and they hated him for it. That is part of the Gospel that we often miss. Even as he is rejected, he tries to gather, to love, to forgive, to have compassion upon, to redirect us all toward God, to bring us into relationship with God and with each other. Other leaders drop out to solitary retreats and pray, or try to conquer the outsiders or the infidels, or try to write their culture across the world. Jesus only wants us to know Him, to know God, to love Him, to love God, to trust Him, to trust God, and to accept the spiritual power that God gives to love others and to forgive others and to feel compassion for others. That is the beginning of eternal life. We don't have to die to begin eternal life. That is the relationship which reveals the father God in Christ, and when we live it, reveals that God is in us. We do not have a word faith. We do not have a location-based holy place sort of faith. There is no tomb for Jesus as there is for other founders of other faiths. There is only trust that he was here, that he is now risen, and that he is present now through the spirit.

We know that in this world, love is often despised or not trusted. We know that because Jesus was despised. We know that faith can be twisted into violence because faith was indeed twisted into violence against Jesus. Words can be distorted so they mean the opposite. Jesus noticed that tendency in the Pharisees. Jesus' actual life and Jesus' love and his actual trust in God, no matter what, his trust in God no matter what, cannot be despised. It cannot be twisted into violence. It cannot be distorted to mean the opposite. Jesus completely trusted God, was immersed in God, no matter what, and we can see that. Jesus loved no matter what, and we can see that. Jesus knew there was a higher reality than just the here and now, and we can see that in his life. How could Jesus, the man, trust this much? How could he love this much? How could Jesus, the man, pass through this world without getting bogged down into the dust and rust of things as we do? Well the scripture answer is this, that Jesus knew from the beginning that he came from the father and that he was returning to the father. He had a firm grasp on a higher reality, and he lived in that higher reality, even in the midst of despair and the self-serving evil of

this world. He knew who he was. He knew whom he trusted. He knew where he was going. We can look around and see. Things are not right here. But God is right here nonetheless, and there is a place where God is all and all, a higher reality than here.

Jesus said in this farewell address in John 14 that he would not leave us orphaned, but that the Holy Spirit would come as a comforter and as an advocate to be with us. The holy breath of God, if you will, active in creation, still here, still giving us life and intimate nearness to God. The Holy Spirit continues to guide and to teach us new ways of being in the presence of God in our world, as dark as it sometimes is. This passage is filled with promises of God’s presence and location with us, but not precise location as a compass might direct you. You know, you can picture the disciples sitting in the corner, staring at a giant road map, just kind of wondering where this kingdom’s going to be and how long it’s going to take to get there, and Jesus says, “You know the way,” and they open up their map and they start poring over it, and Thomas asks a stupid question, “Lord, how can we know the way? Show us the way,” and He says, “I am the way.” These words are too familiar sometimes for the profundity of the words to sink in. “I am the way,” says Jesus. You can take the map and throw it on the floor, and they maybe, I think, at that point, began to get it. We’re not talking about a map or a compass. There’s no road to the way. Jesus is the way, the way to God. And more than a place, Jesus is talking about being with the Father, and with my Father, he says, there is also a place for you.

It’s not exactly this word here, house, and it’s not exactly mansion, it is more about relationship. More like when we say, wherever my family is, that’s home. We might paraphrase, when you have a relationship with me, says Jesus, you also have a relationship with my Father, and when you follow me now, you end up with my Father. Wherever God is, is home. You can start now with me, and I with you, and you will be with God deeply here in this life and beyond time, beyond death as well. Jesus is saying, there is more to existence than you know. God is here and there, and as I am with God, so shall you be with God. Let me say this in another way, Jesus says, in my Father’s house there are many rooms, and I am the road to get there. I am the way.

Now E. Stanley Jones, Baptist missionary, tells about a missionary who was lost in the African jungle. No landmarks. No guided trails. No paths. As he was stumbling through the underbrush, he happened upon a small hut, and he asked the local living there if he would help lead him out. The native nodded, rose to his feet, and he walked directly back into that mess, into that brush, those vines, through the dense grasses, and he was hacking his way through that for an hour or so, and the missionary became worried, and he said, “Are you sure this is the way? I don’t see any path.” The African laughed and said over his shoulder, “In this place, I am the path. Follow me.”

It is rare word translated mansions or rooms or abiding place in John 14. It is only used twice in the New Testament. It is only used twice, and it’s both times here in John 14. It means to, in a sense, move into God’s neighborhood and abide with God. It is the same word used in verse 23, “If a man loves me, he will keep my words, and my father will

## “Moving On Up”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 24, 2005

4

love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him.” In the same way we are to have a place abiding with God in Heaven, it says while we live here and now, if we trust God, God will make his abode with us. Same word. Follow Jesus, do what he says, and God will set up housekeeping in you. There is a related word, often translated abide or stay or remain, and it’s the same word throughout, especially the Gospel of John, where he says, “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me, and those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing. Dwelling forever with God, same word, dwelling with God here. How does that show? By doing the works that Jesus preached, that Jesus taught, that Jesus did. It shows in our lives.

So this word, abiding and dwelling and staying and all the related words, it’s about relationship, the deepest sort of relationship and St. Patrick, of the land of my ancestors, spoke of such a relationship. It was not mere believing, but sort of an immersion in Christ. In the prayer known as “The Breastplate of St. Patrick,” he wrote this, he said, “Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise.” Patrick got it right. That’s the sort of relationship, that’s the sort of abiding, that Christ offers us in this life, and in a way we cannot understand, in the life beyond. Relationship.

Now let me read John 14 again and substitute the word relationship in there. Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me, many people will have opportunities for a relationship with my Father, if it were not so, would I have told you that my dying will open this relationship for you? And if I go and open a relationship for you, I will come again and will make you a part of myself so that where I am, you may be also. You already know how this relationship will be opened up. Thomas said, “We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to a relationship with the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him.” The Lord said to him, “Lord show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said, “Have I been in relationship with you all this time, Phillip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in relationship with the Father and the Father is in relationship with me? The words that I say to you, I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me, who stays with me, who abides with me, who is always in relationship with me, does his works.” Jesus wants to have that sort of intimate relationship with you and with me. Jesus wants you and me to have this deep relationship with God. He’s not giving a road map direction to Heaven’s precise location, but the way to get there is to follow and relate to him. To do what he teaches for God the Father is revealed in what He teaches. The end of the path that is Christ is a holy life, able to love and able to forgive and to grow and to feel compassion and connected to others. We feel so disconnected, so many of us, and that’s not the way God wants us to live. How does that work? I don’t know. I don’t know how it works, but

## “Moving On Up”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 24, 2005

5

God was here, relating in the earthly Christ, and God is here now with us and within us through the Holy Spirit, and God is there wherever Heaven is, and then making us able to be with Him forever as his children. I always imagine when we finally appear, sort of an embrace from God, a dusting off, and God simply saying, “Now where were we?” Time means nothing for God, and God is able to keep us, His children, with Him forever. I imagine an embrace, a dusting off, and a “Now where were we?”, and a continuation for eternity.

Without reference to anyone else’s truth or any other faith, we hear Jesus unequivocally assuring us, we as his disciples, that if we know him, we also know God. Paul Tillich said about this text, he said, “This, this thought that Jesus is the truth, this is a profound transformation of the ordinary meaning of truth. If Jesus says I am the truth, He indicates that in Him, the true, the genuine, the ultimate reality is present.” Jesus is not true because His teachings are true, but His teachings are true because they express the truth which he himself is. He is more than his words. He is more than any words said about him. He is God, disclosed in flesh. Yes, Jesus is the reality of God, the reality that God doesn’t stand at a distance from us, a reality who entered into existence with us, a reality who continues to be available to us through the spirit, and this is that good news, that amazing news, this is our truth. It is the truth to tell without hesitation or embarrassment that Jesus of Nazareth, our Emmanuel, God with us, God among us, is the central focus of our faith, the center of our faith, the very heart of our faith is Truth, with a capital T.

Now, God does what God wants to do, and Christian faith proclaims clearly that what God wants to do is be known. No one has seen God, but Jesus Christ has made Him known. It says in John 1:18 that no one has ever seen God, the only son who was in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. We preserve this truth, not in our declarations or words, but in our lives, in our very lives. And so, if you know this truth, if you know this map, then you also are one part of the way, pointing the way to God. You are the living word also with Christ directing others toward God, and so, please, in your faith, it is not just about believing certain words or phrases, it is giving skin and bones and muscle to the Gospel in your life now and in your life forever. A relationship that starts now. Eternal life starts now, and God is able to continue it forever. Amen.