MANY MANSIONS, MANY PATHS...
YET ONE DESTINY AWAITS US ALL

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places; I go and prepare a place for you. If there are, then I know the dwelling place, that mansion I want to go to when I get to our Father’s house. It’s the mansion that a friend of mine owned in Alameda, one of those wonderful turn-of-the-century Victorian houses. Karleen died of cancer too young, but whenever I read this gospel passage, which is often chosen for funeral Masses, I think of her home and envision a place in heaven just like it. There was a big and spacious kitchen, with a large stove and just the right pots hanging overhead for special dishes -- for tasty, unusual foods that I often shared at her family table and that helped put too many pounds on. And there’ll be an elegant dining room, fit for royalty, but so comfortable that even her most casual of friends can feel at home. The table will be big enough and strong enough so all her family and friends can sit down at once, as long as we promise to get along with each other, which was easy to do in Karleen’s presence.

And the back yard will be spacious for summer entertaining, for tables with over-sized white umbrellas, and a big grill, and a rolling green lawn for volleyball or frisbee. And lots of space for a shaggy dog to roam. At the front of this mansion, as soon as you walk in, will be a living room that truly lives, with vibrant colors and quaint pieces of art. A comfortable couch where you can sit for hours with Karleen, talking serious stuff or laughing over foolish mistakes, planning a future activity or getting her support as you struggle to make it through a recent crisis. A place where she can be all ears as she teaches you the rare art of skillful listening and compassionate response.

Best of all, in the corner of the living room is a large grand piano, a keyboard that Mary Beth or I would be happy to play, and people would enjoy standing next to and singing. The sound of the music would fill this mansion, making it a place of happiness and joy. And everybody would sing along, good voice or not -- to melodies from Cole Porter to Gershwin, from Gregorian chant to show tunes, or a favorite Gilbert and Sullivan piece. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places; I go and prepare a place for you.

In the gospel today, it was the apostle Thomas who asked Jesus the question that was probably on all the disciples’ lips when Jesus told them he would soon be leaving them: Master, we don’t know where you are going; how can we know the way? How can we get to that mansion? The gospels don’t say much about Thomas. He’s mentioned only seven times
in the New Testament and four of those times it’s in a list with the other apostles. Thomas gets separate billing only three times, but those three times were very significant. The first, you recall, is just as Jesus was on his way to Bethany. Jesus was grieving because he heard that his friend Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, had died. Thomas boldly said to the other apostles: *Let us all go along with the Teacher so that we may die with him.*

Then, at the Last Supper, Thomas raised the question we heard in today’s Gospel: *How can we know the way?* And, finally, after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, there is the famous and moving story we heard a couple weeks ago — “doubting Thomas,” who scoffs at the idea that his brothers have seen the Lord alive, and forswears ever believing them: *Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands, he said, and put my finger on those scars and my hands in his side, I will not believe.* A week later, Thomas’ doubts are dramatically washed away as he himself encounters the Risen Lord. He falls to his knees and accepts the Lord’s invitation: *Stop your doubting and believe!* Thomas offered but one response: *My Lord and my God!*

You may have heard of a gospel called the Gospel of Thomas. It’s not a gospel that’s officially recognized by the Church, but many people have examined it because it was mentioned a few years ago in the popular novel *The Da Vinci Code.* There’s a beautiful passage in that Gospel of Thomas that goes like this:

*Jesus said: “It is I who am the light that presides over all... Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me there.”*

It reminds me of the poet Robert Browning who echoed a similar theme:

*The earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God; but only those who see take off their shoes. Our Easter faith invites us into the mystical realm of faith and spirituality, uniting us with the Risen Lord. Jesus, who is one with the Father, in turn unites us with God. Her deep faith gave my friend Karleen much peace and comfort as she faced her impending death from cancer. She “took off her shoes” as Browning says, and recognized more clearly that she was treading on holy ground. She experienced her spirit expanding, even though her earthly life was slipping away from her. She became even more a teacher and friend to others as her own spirit prepared to leave this world.*

Like Thomas in the gospels (and like many of us), she was a skeptic and a searcher, willing to challenge and stretch her own and other’s horizons. As a woman of faith she didn’t fear the future and she tried to work in this world for a better tomorrow. Her intellectual curiosity challenged her to hold to her faith tradition as a touchstone, but to bring her faith into the twenty-first century. Like Thomas, face to face with the Risen Lord, Karleen encountered Christ and that encounter transformed her life until it brought her home to God. Our own faith can be awakened if we take off our shoes and see more clearly the presence of the divine emanating from all creation; if we follow the path of love and mercy that marked the life of Christ, who himself suffered physical pain and anguish, challenges and struggles. He put his trust in the God who delivered him. God’s deliverance from everything that binds us awaits all of us. And it’s good for us to cultivate a positive image of heaven or
eternity to carry with us since it is our ultimate destination. One day, you and I will face the worrisome and fearful reality of death. Jesus, who is the source of life and truth, is also our way to the Father’s house, the place of many mansions. His passage has assured us: there’s a special place awaiting each of us.

Although it’s true that as Christians, we live in the hope of one day dwelling with God in eternity - yet that “place” of hope and compassion and peace exists here and now -- in the places we make where the poor and sick are cared for, where the fallen are lifted up, where the lost and rejected are sought after and guided home, where friendship and love abound. In taking on with joy and resolve the work of compassion and reconciliation the Risen Lord entrusts to us, we build God's house in our midst; we establish the reign of God in the here and now. As we’ll pray before we share the Eucharist: Thy Kingdom come… thy will be done… on earth as it is in heaven.

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