

The Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 1, 2016

**"SAFE AT HOME"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 16:9-15 ~ John 14:23-29

Of all athletic contests, I enjoy watching baseball the most ... mostly because I understand it. I really like baseball stadiums too ... the expanse of green grass ... the sandy blond symmetry of the diamond ... the brightly colored fences embracing the field. I'm a Chicago Cubs fan, but I was overwhelmed when I visited Yankee Stadium once and saw the monument park with the faces of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Mickey Mantle and the like ... ghosts still haunting the stadium with memories ... not only of baseball glory but of American eras long past.

In this way, and *only* in this way, Yankee Stadium was a little like a church to me. It is a place of great tradition in which something new is always happening ... and through which you connect to what has gone before and will come after. If I allow myself to see sports as a metaphor for life, I find the goal is the same ... what the late Bart Giamatti described as "the deepest impulse of baseball ... to go out and back ... to leave and return home." What we are about in the church is making the journey back home ... back to the God who gave us birth ... through the wilderness of our experience ... out to the far country and back ... "through many dangers, toils, and snares" ... towards the promised land of rest.

Our universal experience is to leave the home of our youth for places unknown, always searching for home again. The old saw says, "You can never go back home again," but in many ways we try. People raised in dysfunctional families spend much of their lives trying to find what they never had ... or working out relationships that can never be resolved. Young couples swear they will never fall into the patterns their parents had, but soon clash because their spouses don't play by the rules of the household in which they were raised. When I counsel couples about to be married I certainly touch upon sex and money, but there is seldom disagreement there ... they are in favor of both. The great divide seems to inevitably be ... when will we open our Christmas gifts ... on Christmas Eve or on Christmas morning? Certain rules are wired deeper than consciousness into their psyche because it's the only way of homemaking that they have ever known.

Many of you were blessed to be raised in a good home with stable ... loving ... encouraging ... wonderful ... Christian parents. But in its own peculiar way, a good home just makes it *harder* to leave, for the time comes when you must make that journey of becoming ... and go out into the world on an adventure to discover who you are. And there are many rough places along the way that make you look back and long for the earlier, more carefree days of childhood. Of course, the journey begins before you go ... and what psychologists once called adolescent rebellion ... they now call adolescent individuation ... which actually lasts far beyond adolescence, well into our thirties, sometimes our forties ... sometimes never quite resolved. All

of us must discover the ways in which we are not our parents but our own persons ... as well as the ways in which we will always be our parents no matter how we try.

According to the Bible we are children of God ... made in the Divine image ... wired deeper than consciousness into our psyches ... passed through our genes ... and no matter how far we wander from God and mar that image beyond recognition ... it is always still at least part of who we are. "Our hearts are restless," said Augustine ... whose journey into rebellion is legendary ... "Our hearts are restless, and they cannot rest until they rest in Thee." In other words, God is the home for which all of us are searching for in one way or another, although most people don't realize it.

The search for identity is a spiritual journey. The longing for wholeness is a spiritual journey. The hunger for inner peace is a spiritual journey. The quest for intimacy is a spiritual journey. The pursuit of meaning is a spiritual journey. Healthy human development is a spiritual journey. And in all of these ... only an abiding connection with God will satisfy the deepest longings of our being. God has made us for this relationship most of all ... so the Creator might walk with us ... every Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden once again.

It is an ancient sign of friendship, hospitality, and trust when people invite you into the place where they really live, the way Lydia opened her doors to Paul at Philippi. The Philippian church ... known through the ages for its compassion and loving kindness ... actually started in her home (Acts 16:15). Perhaps the warmth of her home gave birth to the warmth of that church. A church should support the healthy home life of its members ... but just as often I think ... the home life of its members shapes the character of a church ... its level of intimacy ... its appropriate boundaries ... its compassion for the world around it.

Home, of course, is less about place and more about relationship. Home is about feeling at home in a particular space with particular people. Home is feeling at home with your family, whether it is your family of origin ... or your life partner ... or a group of people you have adopted as your friends who are "closer than a brother or sister." Perhaps the most difficult challenge is to feel at home in your own skin ... to be at home with yourself ... for if you don't find that level of inner peace and confidence ... you will never feel at home with anyone else. This, too, is a spiritual journey, and you cannot make a spiritual journey without traveling with God.

Jesus said, *"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them"* (John 14:23). Think of that image for a moment. Can you imagine having Christ for a housemate!? Several years ago I was chatting with a Jewish friend about their customs. After hearing him speak it occurred to me that their deepest spiritual rituals occur not at their temples and synagogues but in their Jewish homes ... the lighting of the Sabbath candle every Friday evening ... the bris ... keeping kosher ... the Passover Seder. Being Jewish is a way of keeping house with God. Most of our Christian rituals happen here, at the church, which makes it easier somehow for us to leave God at church and not realize the holiness of our homes.

In the early days ... before the church had the funds to build sanctuaries and cathedrals ... churches gathered in homes. This kept churches small, of course ... but more intimate ... more

deeply committed to one another ... more truly a family. I wouldn't trade our lovely sanctuary for anything ... and this building is used for so many ministries worthy of the name of Christ ... but perhaps we have lost something in the shift from spiritual movement to religious institution. Nevertheless, the image of church as home and family still echoes through our scripture, and the church continues to be home and family for those who join their lives to it ... especially those who have no other home or family to support them. Frequently, when I ask new members what led them to join our church, they say, "I don't know; I just feel at home here."

*"And we will come to them and make our home with them."* Sounds rather permanent, doesn't it? It means Christ is *not* with us "here and there" ... "now and again" ... *but always* ... to the uttermost end of time. Christ is *not* with us *only* at church ... *only* in worship ... *only* when we happen to think of him ... *only* when we are praying or doing good. Christ is with us for the whole ride ... with all its ups and downs ... "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish;" and death *will not* part us. In Christ we are at home with God.

The Bible promises us a place prepared in God's eternal heaven. It describes the new Jerusalem as a city without a Temple ... no churches, no chapels, no cathedrals, no basilicas, no synagogues, no kingdom halls, no mosques, no tabernacles, no praise centers ... because God is already unambiguously present everywhere throughout. And there is no sun or moon in the new Jerusalem ... no street lamps, no moon towers, no head lamps, no gaslights ... because the light of the world will shine there and the radiant glory of God will banish the darkness of night. Our journey of faith will end at a place where we will feel at home forever, at peace, at rest, free at last, free at last, and "nothing accursed will be found there any more" (Rev 21:22-22:5).

The promise of a home in heaven with God is a meaningful hope, but somehow it is not enough in the meantime, because as you know, the meantime can be pretty mean. A future hope without present help rings empty indeed. I'm glad that God has a place prepared for me at the end of my life. I'm glad that the end of history is in God's hands. But what about right now?

*"And we will come to them and make our home with them."* Everybody needs a home, where he or she can feel safe ... safe to grow ... free to be authentic ... not to have to pretend ... loved for who you are ... and forgiven when you aren't your best self. We have such a home in heaven where we will be with God for eternity ... in the meantime ... God makes a home with us. And to the degree that we follow God's word in disciplined spiritual obedience, we make our homes a place where God can feel at home with us. Thus will we be prepared to feel at home with God forever.

Therefore, the gospel not just "pie in the sky when you die." It's about here and now ... and the ways we accustom ourselves to the constant company of God. Only then can we complete the spiritual journey. Only then can we finally feel at home in our own skins and with one another. *"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking;"* Jesus says. *"If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me"* (Rev. 3:20). So I invite you today, as we gather around the table with bread and drink upon it ... in the name of Christ ... wherever you have wandered ... wherever you have roamed ... come home to the God who loves you ... and know that all are welcome here. Amen.

May we pray?

Inviting God, we invite you into our hearts to stay. As we come home to you, we ask you to make your home in our lives, a habitat fit for your presence, our bodies a living Temple of your Divine love. Let the Divine image you planted in us shine the more clearly so that people might recognize the family resemblance. Bless our church and bless our homes, and dwell with us so that in constant companionship we might prepare ourselves for eternal life in your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.