

Helen Lewis died on Good Friday. For a devoted Christian who hoped, for 94 years, to be Christ-like, that seems a good day to go on to greater glory. And it seems all the more fitting that we should be commending her spirit into the hands of the God who loved her so dearly while we are in the heart of the 50 days of Easter. Because, for Episcopalians, every liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy.

If you were here last Sunday, you would have heard more of this Gospel reading. This is the beginning of what we call the “farewell discourse.” And that, too, is remarkably appropriate. The love that we have for each other in Christ is the source of our sorrow when we part and that sorrow is entwined with the hope and the joy of our trust in the resurrection.

Many of us have come to associate these opening verses of John’s chapter 14 with this particular liturgy. We find reassurance in the promise that Jesus makes to his followers; to us. The image of a great mansion with many dwelling places that waits for us in the afterlife is encouraging. To imagine and trust that Jesus has already welcomed Helen into the place prepared for her is comforting.

The promise of that image is *also* for each of us. Jesus clearly wants his followers to hear that there is nothing uncertain for our present life or our future because of our relationship with him. The promise of Easter is that the dwelling place prepared for each of us is *more*, do you see, more than a home in the afterlife. As if that were not enough, Jesus’ resurrection is a potent, focused and compelling statement about what God is doing right now and forever with creation and with humanity.

The dwelling place prepared for Helen and for each of us is abiding life in the intimate presence of God; life being held in the loving arms of God. Resurrection life means a full share in the intimate bond that the Risen and ascended Christ shares with God in the love of the Holy Spirit.

Where Jesus is, there we will be. Where Jesus is, Helen is now. That’s part of the promise Jesus makes and why he can reassure each of us: “Do not let your hearts be troubled...I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

And yet, astonishingly, there is still more to the promise. Because God’s house is not a house of death, but a house of life. And so Jesus is inviting each of us to enter as fully as we can into this life; to be fully alive,

in the way that Helen lived the life given to her; a life blooming with curiosity, kindness and joy; a life made so radiant by the love of God that the sweetness of a simple smile could illuminate a room.

The dwelling place that Jesus prepares is not a place of death, but an everlasting place of presence; not a place of never-ending time, but a never-ending presence beyond time. That eternal presence is here in this life, in this moment, though not yet as fully as Helen experiences that presence now.

Philip and Thomas and the other disciples in John's Gospel were facing the death and loss of their dear friend and teacher, Jesus. Without the experience of his resurrection to reassure them, their hearts were deeply troubled. And so Jesus could only *tell* them to calm their hearts. He could not direct their attention to his resurrection after the fact as we can. Jesus could only ask them to trust that his pending death was a temporary departure. He could only ask them to trust that he and all of God's children will be reunited in some different form in a dwelling place prepared for them.

"Trust in God, trust also in me," Jesus said. His followers' ability to trust Jesus and allow his words to bring peace depend entirely on their understanding of who Jesus is. Maybe the same is true for some of us. The ministry and life, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are evidence of the interpenetrating realities of Jesus Christ; the Holy One who gave Jesus to us and the love that brings life from death.

These can never be separated and neither can we, even by death. We are bound in a holy communion of saints. And so, even in our sorrow and grief, we celebrate the life and love of our sister Helen by breaking bread and drinking wine, sharing with her the real presence of Christ in a new way.

Let me leave you with a poem to ponder as we prepare to come to this holy table.

"The Beloved goes before you into this moment,  
is here in this moment before you are,  
and makes room for you,  
opens a space, blesses your belonging.

The Gracious One comes to you:  
leaves the place of divine certainty and perfection

and meets you where you are, in your uncertainty,  
your limitation, your partiality,  
and takes you to himself,  
gathers you into his heart,  
so that where he is...  
—right here, right now,  
in the intimate presence of God—  
you may be.

What if you were to enter your life?  
It's ready for you.  
What if, in gratitude and humility,  
you were to live it welcoming others  
into the many rooms of God?\*

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Works consulted:

\*Edited version of "Preparing a Place," by the Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes.