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First Presbyterian Church of Greenville
Sunday, January 11
Text: Psalm 84:1-4; John 14:1-14
Title: This Old House

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

- Psalm 84:1-4

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In God's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me. If you know me, you will know my God also. From now on you do know God and have seen God." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us God, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen God. How can you say, 'Show us God'? Do you not believe that I am in God and God is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but God who dwells in me does God's works. Believe me that I am in God and God is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to God. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that

God may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

-John 14:1-14

I have many memories of my childhood home in Kirksville, MO. A two-story – 5-bedroom, 3 bath, white house with blue shutters on the corner of Patterson & Lewis Street.

That old, turn of the 20th century house, was on the market for several years before our family discovered it – and, because of that, the church that had just extended my father a call cautioned us not to buy the house. This was not bad advice since the house had previously been rented out to college students for a number of years. It was the summer of 1986. I remember that time well, because – thanks for Bill Buckner – it was the year the New York Mets won the World Series. A rare feat!!

I remember the many pets we had in that house. We had a dog, which together we named “Ubu Chewy Snoofer Hayes.” Also, we had many cats over the years. We named every cat we had “Woody.” Our 3rd cat, we named: “Woody Wat III, Reborn.” My older brother, Chris, had a favorite pastime; he would, periodically, take Woody Wat III out to the car when it was raining – so he would have some company while he read the latest Marvel Comic Books.

We had many family meetings in our living room, which was located in the center of our house. We would frequently gather around the woodstove on the white shag rug and tell stories. Each one of us would take turns sharing our joys and struggles.

There were many holiday meals we had in that old house. You could always expect an eclectic cast of characters around our table at mealtimes – not just family, but we would almost always have a few members of the church over who could not get home for the holidays. You can bet that we had pound cake and pumpkin pie! Enough to get sick sure, but a Good kind of sick!

Now – I can’t just stand here and romanticize about my childhood home there at 824 E. Patterson. As I said, this was an early 20th century house – and you know what that means! It was a lot of work.

Anyone who owns an old house knows – the constant repairs, renovations, and maintenance take a lot of time, energy and money. It was not uncommon for a summer vacation to consist of major projects around the house – sanding and staining the wood floors, putting down new tile on the kitchen floor, painting the white, picket fence, or one of the many gardening projects. There were times we’d watch Bob Villa on the TV show *This Old House* and then we would try to put some of his insight to work on our old home. The holidays were no exception. If everyone is home for the holidays, good! – that means that there are more bodies to put to work. For a family of 6 – along with the regular visitors and houseguests – some would say that we had *a house with many dwelling places*. The renovations we made on our home, they weren’t just renovations. They were tangible symbols of our love for one another.

Well – the inevitable happened and our family eventually had to sell the house at 824 E. Patterson.

I was a sophomore in college – my younger siblings were applying for colleges – and it was a good time for my parents to move. For many years that old house felt like a house built on solid rock – with a foundation of love and care. Yet – it was time for a change – and so, yielding to God’s call, they sold the house and moved on.

In our text this morning – Jesus uses the image of a “house with many dwelling places” and he uses the image in the context of a dialogue with the disciples about BELIEF... and he also uses it to describe the world in which we live.

Jesus says: “Believe in God! and believe in me!” I don’t know about you, but I don’t like it when someone tells me what to believe, yet this is precisely what Jesus is doing!

Our faith in God is something we are called to take care of and we are also called to nurture the faith of one another. Like our homes, which are places where we have invested our time, money, and energy – we must take the time to tend the garden that rests in our souls. And, when there are those moments when we are at our wits end with others, perhaps ourselves, or the world – we are to ask God to help us to believe... because BELIEF, like most things in life, is not only an individual practice; it involves community.

For the disciples, it seems like a funny, perhaps awkward time for Jesus to be talking about BELIEF. Their world seems to be collapsing in chaos around them, as Jesus had just said: “Where I am going, you cannot now follow; but afterwards you will follow.” (John 13:36-37) and now he has the nerve to say: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe in me?!”

I can only imagine what was going through the minds of the disciples. Their response to Jesus’ confronting message is similar to our own response.

Some of the disciples persistently hold on to trust in God. Their trust may have echoed the Psalmist in Psalm 18 “It is you who light my lamp; the LORD, my God, lights up my darkness.”

Then – there were disciples like Thomas and Philip; they were not going to trust God without asking a few questions first!

Jesus says: “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas responds: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

And Philip says: “Lord, show us God, and we will be satisfied.”

Perhaps Thomas and Philip are trying to learn more about Jesus’ theology. Or perhaps they are trying to reconcile their newfound grief and sadness, as Jesus has recently disclosed that he will soon die and that he will no longer be with them. Jesus says: “Where I am going, you cannot now follow; but *afterwards* you will follow.” (John 13:36-37)

Here the disciples had just started to feel *at home* with their belief in God; they felt strong in their faith. And then Jesus had to go and talk about death! Now why in the world would he do something like that? This is just about enough to mess with anyone’s mind! The disciples were finally beginning

to get a handle on Jesus' teachings – finally learning to put them pretty well into practice – they were enjoying Jesus' company – and then, all at once, he says that he has to leave them: “Where I am going, you cannot follow, but *afterwards* you will follow.”

The questions that Thomas and Philip ask are good, because they are honest. And yet, their questions are a lens into their grief. The disciples are trying to find their way back home – home to their belief in God.

I remember a fellow who was trying to find his way home once. His name was Mr. Oliver. He was in his 90s when I knew him. He lived at home by himself and I remember Mr. Oliver, he lived off of very little. Though he had plenty of money, he lived in conditions that many would consider poor. My dad and I used to pay Mr. Oliver a visit quite frequently and he would always make a point to offer money to give to the poor. We reluctantly accepted, knowing that he was living in such poor conditions himself – but we could see that he had an immense heart for the homeless and he wouldn't take “No” for an answer.

Well – one winter we were having one of the worst cold spells we'd had in years and – seeing that Mr. Oliver had no heat in his home – we offered him our house to sleep-in for the night. To this day – I still don't know the reason why, but our whole family piled into the living room to sleep that night, and Mr. Oliver was to sleep on our couch. As he lay down to sleep that night, our family had to laugh when our dog Ubu Chewy tried to jump up on the couch with Mr. Oliver to which he said: “I think I could do without the dog.”

Throughout the night – it seemed that every hour or two Mr. Oliver would be up and trying to walk out the back door. I woke up to the sound of my dad, yelling: “Mr. Oliver! Where are you going?!” To which he said back a little confused: “Well – I don't quite know, I guess I'm going back home.”

Like Mr. Oliver, like the disciples in our text this morning – Isn't it true that we are all – one way or another – trying to find our way back home? We are all trying to find our way back home to God, home to a world of justice and fairness, home to a firm, unwavering belief.

A pastor and mentor of mine, Tom Kort, once told me: “We go around our whole lives looking for home. Then – we find out that home is the place where we first started!”

One of the children at First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto reminded me of this. Her name is Angie. She reminded me of the innate faith that we are given as children and how our faith – *like our dwelling places* – requires steady repairs and hard work, maintenance and care.

One Sunday morning the children were involved in a painting project. They were studying an art book that was filled with simple designs for the kids to paint. Angie liked one of the images of a frog that was in the art book... and she liked it so much that she wanted to have it to have it painted on her hand. It was okay with Mom, so the teacher went right on ahead.

Before beginning – the teacher said: “Now – I haven't done this before.” As she realized she was painting this on Angie's hand and not just on any old piece of paper she said: “I don't want to mess this up!” Angie responded with great calm and said: “Just practice.”

And so – it is in our journey of faith. There are times when we are just trying to live life – just trying to love one another to the best of our ability, and we wonder “How is it that we are to believe?”

Take it from Angie: “Just practice.”

Practice believing! It takes practice to believe... and ultimately it is a gift, which is given to us by God. And we are offered a place to practice our faith in this world, which is our house with many dwelling places.

And as God and our community helps you to build your own house that is your faith – remember: You do not need to worry about building equity with this house. You do not need to concern yourself with a low-interest loan, nor do you need to concern yourself with finding a fixed rate.

All you need to do with this house is: Practice building it! And, friends, be easy on yourself those times when you get it all wrong and have to rebuild parts of it! For – when you go in the wrong direction – God will be that companion to find you and bring you back. As Jesus says in our text: “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

God says that when it comes to the house that is our faith – not-a-one of us lives in a single dwelling home; but, we all live in a house with many dwelling places!

As we walk through this world – with eyes wide opened! – We are bound to meet many grace-filled people; we will meet companions who will point us in the direction of our TRUE HOME in the presence of our LOVING GOD.

People like Mr. Oliver, a man who – I believe with all my heart – God has welcomed home into God’s everlasting presence.

People like Angie who reminds us to: “Just Practice.”

And now here we all are! - God’s children laboring together on the house of our God! This Old House that is our FAITH; it is a good house! – and in it there are many dwelling places.

The Psalmist in Psalm 84 says:

Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my ruler and my God.
Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.