

**Easter 5A
John 14:1-14
May 22, 2011**

I write my sermons on Thursday if I can. I had pondered holding off this week, thinking maybe the end of the world would come on Saturday, and I wouldn't have to.

Probably just as well I sat down on Thursday and wrote it then, isn't it? We are all still here. Either we missed the flight into heaven, or it didn't happen at all. Either way, I am very glad to be here, with you, this morning. There is nowhere else in heaven or on earth that I would rather be on a Sunday morning than here at All Saints with all of you. It is rapture enough, for me.

But it raises the question: What would it have been like—the rapture? The rapture, some of you may know, is not even IN the book of Revelation. Revelation has a lot of weird stuff in it, but the rapture is not in there. The place where end-times folks get the idea of the rapture is in the oldest book of the New Testament, the piece of writing we have that is closest to the actual time of Jesus. It is in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, written somewhere around the year 50, 15 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Paul writes to churches in Thessalonika. People are worried. Jesus has been gone 15 years and he hasn't come back yet. People are dying, and yet, Jesus hasn't returned to end the world. So Paul writes to comfort them, and he says, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.

“For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.” (I Thess. 4:13-17)

So the rapture folks have it mixed up. Paul says the dead rise first, and then the living get caught up in the clouds and soar up to heaven. But either way, however the world ends, however it all wraps up, however it is that Jesus comes, and whoever it is who gets there first -- dead or living -- the punch line for Paul is this: “We will be with the Lord forever.”

We will be with the Lord. We will see Jesus, face to face. As Paul says in First Corinthians, “We will know fully, even as we have been fully known.”

We will see God. And what will any one of us do then?

About 15 years ago, there was a cute little pop song sung by Joan Osborne, called “One of Us.” In it she asks, *If God had a name, what would it be and would you call it to his face, if you were faced with him in all his glory? What would you ask if you had just one question?*

What would you ask? What could you ask, if you were face to face with God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen?

We walk through life burdened with questions. Unanswerable, frustrating questions. This world makes no sense. It's not logical. Why did that child get cancer and die? Why did my partner walk out? Why can't I find a job, or a mate, or some peace of mind? How can God just SIT THERE and watch as woman after woman is raped in the Congo or in the tent cities of Port au Prince? Where is that transplant for that young man who has waited so patiently and so long? Why is my department being shut down, and what will I do now? What kind of world is this that my grandchildren must inherit?

Questions. Unanswerable, frustrating questions. John's gospel is full of these questions, questions that never seem to get answered in the way that they were asked. Whether it's Nicodemus asking Jesus how is it a person can be born again when he can't climb back into his mother's womb. Or the Samaritan woman asking for some living water. Or frustrated disciples saying, "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?" Or disciples seeing a blind man and asking, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

And here, in this last section of John's gospel, when Jesus is talking and talking and talking on the night before he is arrested ... teaching, reassuring, praying, trying to get his friends prepared for his immanent death – here in this last section of John's gospel, the questions come fast and furious. Peter wants Jesus to tell them where he is going. Thomas wants to know the way. And finally Philip, frustrated and confused, asks the question that must have made the whole room gasp.

"Show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

Show us the Father? No good Jew would dare to ask that question. In ancient Israel it was understood ... no one could see God and live. When Moses went up on the mountain to speak with God, the Israelites were terrified and begged to stay down in the valley, far from the presence of the living God. When Moses asked to see God, the Lord hid him in the cleft of the mountain and as he passed by, all Moses could see was God's backside, retreating. Isaiah in the Temple looked up and only saw God's cloak, billowing and swirling in the space above his head. Elijah on the mountain heard only the sound of sheer silence as God drew near.

God is too much, too holy, too infinite, too powerful, too mysterious, to be borne. We could not bear the intensity of God's presence, if we were faced with him in all his glory. Who among us, really, could see God and live?

But Philip asks to see God anyway. And when he does, he speaks for all of us. All of us with all our questions, all our doubts, all our anxieties and fears and griefs and burdens who once ... just once ... want to call God to account for all that is broken and wrong and evil in this world. Who once ... just once ... want the reassurance that God is real, that God loves us and cares for us and walks with us and guards and guides us. Who once ... just once ... would indeed like to come face to face with God in all his glory and ask just one question: WHY?

But no one has seen God. John even tells us that in the very first chapter of his gospel. He writes, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (John 1:18) And Jesus answers Philip ... “Philip, don’t you know me? Philip, can’t you see me for who I really am? Philip, have I been with you all this time and you don’t see me? Philip ... when you see me, you see God.”

When you see Jesus ... healing the sick, giving sight to the blind ... you see God. When you see Jesus ... welcoming the children, forgiving the unforgivable ... you see God. When you see Jesus ... eating with sinners and partying with the outcasts ... you see God. When you see Jesus ... arms stretched wide upon the cross in an embrace big enough to hold the entire world ... you see God. A God who will go to any lengths, use any means possible, to demonstrate how deep is God’s mercy and grace, how wide is God’s forgiveness and love.

This God can handle our questions. This God can handle our doubt, our anger, our fear, our despair, and our rebellion. Do you have questions? Just one question? A whole load of questions? Bring them. When you have reached the end of your rope. When you have sleepless nights and anxious hearts and doubt and dread and fear, bring them. Cast your gaze on Jesus, the one who shows us God.

Because what we see in Jesus is love. Perfect love. For you. For me. For the whole messed-up, mixed-up, unraptured, yet still hopeful ... world.