

# “Who Is He, Really?”

Text: John 14:1-12

Sermon by Robert Lee Hill

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### **Ash Wednesday:**

#### **A Time for Finding Out Who We Are**

Ash Wednesday is a prime time for finding out who we are. You might even say it's the premier occasion for understanding our identity as Christians, or at least beginning to understand anew our identity as Christians, in a very complex, confusing, and occasionally deceptive world.

We're searching all the time – aren't we? – at the self-help shelves at bookstores, at class reunions, in mid-career shifts to new jobs, at the gym, in the sanctuary of hearts when we pray – and now comes a moment when the searching has a new and powerful possibility of being fulfilled. It's as if we showed up at the door of the chapel, and said: *“I heard that I can find out who I am in this church. Is this the right place?”* Or, just like we sang to commence this worship service, *“Here I am, Lord! Now would you mind telling me what I'm doing here?!”*

#### **Finding Out Who Jesus Is**

The challenge this Lenten season is to find out who we are by discovering and re-discovering some very interesting insights and revelations about who Jesus is for each of us individually, for all of us together, and for the world.

And if you're looking for insights and revelations about who you are and who Jesus is, the gospel of John is an excellent resource for holy awareness and practical knowledge. John's gospel is a unique repository for several of the unveilings of Jesus' true character and purpose. And there may be no better method for the discovery of who Jesus is than taking John's gospel and perusing the multitude of Jesus' *“I am ...”* sayings in it.

Starting today and for the next few weeks we're going to do just that. We're going to journey through seven of the great *“I am ...”* sayings by

Jesus in John's gospel. Today we start our trek by considering one of the most dramatic and momentous of the "I am..." sayings.

The fourteenth chapter of John is one of the most beloved and cherished passages of the New Testament. It is full of gravitas but it also rises like a helium-filled balloon on a hot day with its effusive confidence in God's saving love.

At the beginning of the chapter Jesus is saying "goodbye" to his disciples. He has been breaking bread with them. He has washed their feet. Then he uses the occasion of their gathering to offer them (and us) a summary of his core identity. And his hope, the story shows, is that they might discover their truest, highest destiny, their best selves.

John's account of Jesus' "farewell" discourse includes the now famous exchange between Thomas and Jesus. Thomas expresses his doubts – naturally and succinctly – and thus prompts Jesus' clearest declaration of who he is. Thomas' question is about location, where Jesus is going as he leaves them. But Jesus' answer has more to do with existential vocation than it does with temporal location. He says, *"I am the way, the truth and the life."*

### **The Way**

In effect, Jesus is saying *"You don't need an address, a map, a set of coordinates for the place where I am going. Just be and abide with me. The place is not as important as the person you're with in that or any other place."*

I've sometimes described stewardship from a perspective different from our normal takes on the "S" word. Rather than talk about money, we've begun to understand increasingly that Jesus offered us an invitation to a new way of being with God and with one another. Here's the definition: *"Jesus gives us a way of life – resplendent with possibilities for joy, mercy, justice, grace, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, and wholeness – and then he bids us, he calls us to give that way of life to others."* This is what it means to say that Jesus is "the way."

I treasure also the way that Fred Craddock prays each morning:

*"Lord, I thank you for giving me a way of life that's more important than any way I feel about it on a given day."* Jesus says and we find ever more believable each and every day that his way of life is the best way of life we could ever

imagine. (Not so coincidentally, *"The Way"* is one of the first names for the communities that called themselves Christian.) This way, after all, is a way that we'd never give up, a "road" as some translations (like Eugene Peterson's) prefer, a route to that which is really real and fully vibrant.

### ***The Truth***

Jesus' response to Thomas's doubting also has to do with truth. Now, Jesus is totally unlike Colonel Jessup in *"A Few Good Men."* You'll recall how Jessup took the witness stand and was asked to tell the truth. *"You want the truth?"* Jessup declaims with a sneer. *"You can't handle truth!"* But Jesus says, *"You want the truth? I am the truth."* Now please note that Jesus doesn't declare a propositional truth or a doctrinal position of any sort. He doesn't recite a complicated creed about himself, or the manner in which the cosmos has been constructed or humanity's status before God. He simply says, *"I am ... the truth."* This is not a debate about a theological proposition but rather an invitation to know a person and the deep truths that arise in a relationship with him.

If we're honest, as Thomas was eventually honest, Jesus is challenging the lies by which we human beings confuse and deceive and warp our lives. Lies like:

*"Wealth is a sign of God's blessing."*

*"There really is no justice in the world."*

*"The mercy of God is available only in a limited supply."*

*"God helps those who help themselves."*

*"Might makes right."*

*"Some folks are really more precious to God than others."*

*"Your value is equal to what you possess."*

(The shorter version of this one is *"You are what you own."*)

All lies, Jesus says. They are, as John Knowles (famed author of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and a fine poet who sadly died too soon last year) put it, "desert making heresies." Remembering a time when he and his compeers were not at their best, Knowles describes *"that desert making heresy/That happiness is having what one lacks."* ("1955," **Poems**) Jesus says in John's gospel account *"If you know me and the truth that I am, you'll be empowered to live a life in which you never lack for anything that truly matters."*

This Lenten season, allow me to urge you to give up something new. Instead of chocolate or desserts – and thus transforming Lent into some sort of diet plan (some strange version, like the “*Sonoma Lenten Diet*,” or the “*South Beach Lenten Diet*”) – give up one or two of the little lies by which we sometimes live our lives. Perhaps they’ll be among the ones I’ve already cited or maybe you have some special secret ones. Whatever lie you choose, give it up for Lent. And take on the truth of Jesus in your daily walk. You may not lose any weight but ultimately your soul will be a lot healthier.

### ***The Life***

And Jesus also says he is “the life.”

Not play acting, but life.

Not chicanery and faking it, but authentic life.

No rehearsal, but rather the actual, authentic performance of living.

And not just any life, but the ultimate abundant life that God wants everyone to have.

The season of Lent and the spiritual disciplines associated with it are too often associated with privation, denial, and what sometimes amounts to self-denigration. Jesus’ call to check your egos at the door of his way of life is not a condemnation of human existence. It’s really about lengthening your life, lengthening your faith, lengthening your relationship with God and with others. That’s one of the root origins for the word “*Lent*” itself, “*the lengthening*” of days in the springtime. To Thomas and to us, Jesus is saying, “*Come, lengthen your life and your love, stretch your understanding and your curiosity, widen your grasp of God and the gifts God wants to give you today, right now, in and through me.*”

### ***Who Is He, Really? The Sermon On Your Forehead***

The question that sits atop this sermon as its title, which is the focusing question for our whole Lenten series of Sunday morning sermons, is one of those persistently important, crucial questions of the ages: “*Who Is He, Really?*”

Who is this Jesus?...

for the student and the teacher,

for the boss and the employee,

for the husband and the wife,

for the brother and the sister,  
for the innocent newbie Christian and the barnacled veteran,  
for the powerful and the powerless,  
for the insiders and the outsiders,  
for the good, the bad and the ugly,  
for you and for me.

As you receive the smudge of ashes that have been rendered from last year's palm crosses and Palm Sunday fronds, co-mingled with all the years before for nearly a generation, let the horizontal line represent Jesus as the Way that can liberate you out of every situation where you feel or think or believe you are caught or hindered, the Way of Life that is resplendent with possibilities for grace for you.

As you receive the vertical line of ash, let it represent the Truth that Jesus is, above all the lies we too often let our lives be governed by. The Truth that God is love. The Truth that there is enough divine mercy for everyone. The Truth that God wills us to enjoy our faith and church and families and jobs to the highest and deepest extent imaginable.

And then let the resulting cross on your forehead stand for The Life that Christ gives to you and me, freely and abundantly. The Life that is above and beyond any kind of life that we have ever imagined living, a resurrected life, each and every day.

And as you walk from this place, as you greet others along the way, as you deepen you're faith, the sign on your forehead will become a sermon itself. And, leaning ever closer toward Easter's great Good News, your life will be quite a sermon indeed. Let it be so. Let it be so. AMEN.