Longing to Go Home
“Heaven” sermon series #1
John 14:1-4

Last Sunday I was excited to hear the testimonies of lives changed in the Vermont Adult and Teen Challenge Program, especially Steve Davis who grew up here in the church. What a great example Steve is, showing us that God doesn’t give up on us even when we run far from Him. The power of Jesus is transforming people in incredible ways and some of their testimonies are on the CD from last week. On Tuesday, my day off, I was excited to play my first game ever of Frisbee golf with Leisa up on the Millstone course in Websterville. I only did 5 holes, but I got a par when I redid the first hole! On Thursday, Leisa and I were excited that a workman came to replace a window that has had 4 or 5 things broken on it for several years. On Friday I briefly went to fish in a stream which I haven’t done in over a decade. These were all things that were planned so they excited me ahead of time.

You and I look forward to many things in this life – the weekend, a good grilled steak, an adventure, being with friends or family, holidays, warm weather or snow depending on your temperament, a time of quiet rest. Life is simply richer when we anticipate for something that will actually happen. The Eeyores of this world miss out on a lot of life! “Won’t work – no use”. What happens when we stop looking forward to something?

I remember talking to my grandfather when he was 92. He had been very active all his life – still doing giant swings on the high bar at 88. Later, piece by piece his body stopped working so he couldn’t do any of the things he used to be able to do. That day at 92, my grandfather was super depressed because they just told him he could no longer put salt on his food. He told me that was the only thing he had left to look forward to until he died and now that was taken away from him. Without something to look forward to, everyday just became endless.

We live in a culture that wants instant gratification and is really not preparing for the future. We may spend 20% of our life slowed down and unable to do what we could when we were younger, yet we aren’t preparing to be meaningful even during those earthly years, let alone for all eternity. So what I would like to tackle for our next worship teaching series is our eternal future. What do we have to look forward to as followers of Jesus Christ? What is heaven like? How are we picturing eternity? I want to do this in a way that motivates, encourages and strengthens us so we aren’t so earthly minded we are of no heavenly good.

PROPOSITION: Heaven is a real place which will be greater than our warmest picture of home – God’s children long to go home and, when rightly pictured, that gives believers endurance in this life.

I. There is a place of life after death
   A beloved passage at funerals is John 14. Let’s READ verses 1-4. At the end of chapter 13, Jesus had just told the disciples that He would be betrayed by one of them, that He was
going to physically die & leave them. Then Jesus says to His closest friends, *"Don’t let your inner being go into despair because I am leaving you."* Why? Because it is not the end! There is life after death. Notice that Jesus wants the disciples to picture this future as a place, not just an existence. Here, a big mansion with many rooms with one of those rooms specially prepared for each of His disciples. Or as v 4 says, *"You know the way to THE PLACE where I am going."*

This is a very physical description implying a physical existence and a physical place in the future, yet for many in our day, heaven is often pictured as humans who become spirits, like angels sitting on clouds with harps. So spiritual that they can’t conceive of any fun!

A. An innate sense of the eternal in humans

Look at history and you will see that there is an innate sense of the eternal in humans. Until recent times, it doesn’t matter what country or culture you went to, they thought there was life after death.

B. Early Christians were preoccupied with heaven

The early Christians were preoccupied with heaven. We see this in grave markings of martyred Christians buried in the catacombs under the city of Rome. Here is what some of their burial inscriptions said:

- In Christ, Alexander is not dead, but lives
- One who lives with God
- He was taken up to his eternal home

Historian Ulrich Simon writes *"Pictures on the catacomb walls portray Heaven with beautiful landscapes, children playing and people feasting at banquets."* In 125 AD a Greek named Aristides wrote to a friend explaining why this new religion of Christianity was growing so fast: *"If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God and they escort the body with songs and thanksgiving as if he was setting out from one place to another nearby."* When a faithful Christian died, they would have a party and a parade. The church father Cyprian encouraged believers to welcome, instead of fear the day of their death knowing that it *"sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the Kingdom. Anyone who has been in a foreign land longs to return to his own native land ... We regard paradise as our native land."* These early Christian perspectives sound almost foreign today, don’t they? When Jesus told his disciples *"In My Father’s house are many rooms ... I am going there to prepare a place for you,"* He deliberately chose common, physical terms (house, rooms, place) to describe where He was going and what He was preparing for us in heaven. He wanted to give the disciples then, and us today, something tangible to look forward to – an actual place where we will be with Jesus. This place is not an ethereal realm of disembodied spirits (woo, woo, woo) – it is a place we can get excited about. *Is your picture of heaven keeping you from getting genuinely excited about it?*
C. Christians through the ages longed for heaven

Probably the most famous pastor to come from New England was Jonathan Edwards in the 1700’s. He said, “It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven ... to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for or set our hearts on anything else, but which is our proper end and true happiness.” This longing didn’t suddenly come up in his old age. In his early twenties, Jonathan Edwards composed a list of life resolutions. Listen to this one – “Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can.”

Again that almost sounds heretical today – seek as much happiness in the next world as possible? Most Americans are just fixated on getting happiness right now with little regard even for next month! Even many with church backgrounds aren’t excited about going to heaven – they just picture angels with harps on clouds or endless boring church services. As John Eldredge says in The Journey of Desire, “Nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service ... We have settled on an image of the never-ending- sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen. And our heart sinks. Forever and ever? That’s it? That’s the good news? And then we sigh and feel guilty we are not more ‘spiritual’. We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what life we can.” There are going to be great worship times in heaven that move us beyond our wildest imaginations – far beyond anything we have experienced. But does our picture of heaven also see a place where you do meaningful and pleasurable things with enjoyable people? Do we picture beautiful landscapes, gardens, rivers and untold adventures? Do we picture the wonder of God Himself. These are some of the pictures God gives us in the Bible. The one we are focusing on today is heaven as our home – do you see heaven as where YOU belong?

II. Jesus is preparing an actual home for us in heaven

READ John 14:2. Jesus wants us to picture that He is preparing an actual home for us in heaven. As 2 Corinthians 5:8 says, “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Jesus wants us to picture heaven as home, in the best sense of the word. That is what the black slaves saw so clearly in the midst of cruel and unjust slavery. They sang, “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming forth to carry me ... (where) home.” That was their understanding of death & excitement for their life to come.

A. Home is a place we want to be

What’s home? Home is the place we want to be. When we are somewhere else and things go bad – we want to go home. When we go to another area and all the differences begin to overwhelm us – we long to go home. In fact right now, you may be able to feel a comfortable bed, taste a home-cooked meal and picture having a good time there. Home is where we want to be.
Home is also about comfort. It is where we can be ourselves. It is a place to put on sweats & just relax on the couch or be silly. Home is a place we want to be.

Home is where friends or family come to visit. It is where we putter with plants, play games, read our favorite books, and listen to music we enjoy. It is where we enjoy the little things of life and can slow down. You may be thinking, “Boy, Neal, you sure are romanticizing home – I’ve had terrible experiences in my home.” You are not alone, but even in saying that, we show that we have a positive picture of what a good home should be like. It may not be what we personally have experienced, we may not know how to make that home happen, but we can imagine a great picture of what we would love HOME to be. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, our true home is in heaven which will have far more good things than we can imagine, but none of the bad. I think God wants us to picture a hot tub, a long hot shower, a place for our fishing gear, comfortable reading chair, fun with friends, tasty food with no weight gain, a small waterfall, and quiet rest. Oh wait – that’s my list! I’m sure yours will be pictured somewhat differently. While Americans use the term “our heavenly home”, we don’t seem to do much imagining in this area. Why not?

B. Theological neglect
Part of this is because there have been long times of theological neglect. In simple terms, gifted Bible teachers used the word ‘heaven’ a bunch, but they didn’t actually dig into it the way they did other areas. For example …

- John Calvin was a great theologian and prolific writer, yet he never wrote a commentary on the book of Revelation nor did he ever deal with the eternal state at any length. Though he encourages meditation on Heaven in his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he doesn’t delve into it like he does God, Christ, salvation, Scripture or the church.
- William Shedd’s three-volume “Dogmatic Theology” contains 87 pages on eternal punishment but only 2 on heaven.
- In Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ 900 page “Great Doctrines of the Bible” less than 2 pages are devoted to the eternal state and the New Earth.
- Louis Berkhof’s classic “Systematic Theology” devotes 38 pages to creation, 40 pages to baptism & communion, 15 pages to the intermediate state. Yet it contains only one page on the eternal state.

It is hard to look forward to something that you don’t take time to think about the possibilities and limitations given by the Bible.

C. Practical neglect
Then there is the practical neglect by pastors, parents and small group leaders. We just don’t have many books, teachings, radio programs, or movies on the joys of heaven. But when the simple song “I Can only Imagine” came out it became the biggest selling Christian single of our day and the only one to reach triple platinum. And the
lyrics just deal with what the first couple moments will be in heaven. The way Americans live this life is like we are part of a NASA team preparing for a 5 year mission to Mars. We go through intensive training for years. We talk about how to get there, we spend time learning everything we can about doing the journey to Mars well. But after liftoff, one of the other astronauts turns to us and asks, “What do you know about Mars?” “Nothing, we never really talked about it. Guess we’ll just find out when we get there.” That would be pretty foolish – we’d be totally unprepared. Mars was mentioned a lot – but never fully developed as a topic of its own.

III. Our heavenly home is a specially fitted for us

Today we are just starting with one picture of heaven. It is a place of life after death – Jesus is preparing an actual home for us. Now let’s READ John 14:3. There is a picture behind these words we miss in our culture.

A. The gift from a groom to his beloved bride

In Jesus’ day, once a couple got engaged to be married – the man would go off and start building a home for his future family. People didn’t move back then and Genesis says that a new couple was to leave home and cleave to their new mate. Most often, this new home was actually just a room attached to the parent’s home – the young couple didn’t have money for land. Once that room was finished, the groom and his groomsmen would come back for the bride to take her home with him. The wedding date wasn’t a set date a year later, but when their new room was ready. That is the picture these specific words and phrases are pointing to. We not only have life after death, but we have a heavenly home to look forward to – and it isn’t just any home – it is a home specially fitted for us by our beloved. If that bride said, “I’ve always dreamed of a bay window” there was a good likelihood the groom would have done whatever he could to get her that. Do you dream about heaven that way? God wants us to. Heaven is not a vague, bland, same-for-everyone spiritual existence. It is a home Jesus Christ, the groom of the church, is specially making for all His followers.

B. “But I don’t want to leave the party”

Some days it is hard to think about heaven because of the good that is going on in our lives. It is like we’ve been invited to a party and we are having a good time. Then all of a sudden, someone says “It’s time, we need to go home”. We’re disappointed – no one wants to leave a party early that they are enjoying. But we leave the party, probably feeling a little sorry for ourselves and a bit alone – then as we open the door of our home and reach for the light, someone yells out “surprise”. Your house is filled with familiar faces. It’s a party for you! You smell your favorite foods – it’s a feast. You recognize people you haven’t seen in ages. Then one by one, a number of the people at your other party show up. Then you realize, this is the real party – this is real life. Christians facing terminal illness or imminent death often feel they’re leaving the party early – that God is asking them to go home early. They are disappointed thinking they are going to miss something important in this current life after they leave. But the truth is, the real party is happening at our home – and our
home is in heaven – precisely where we are going. It is everyone else who is missing out, until they join us – one by one, as it becomes their time to come to their heavenly home. NEVER try to come early, there is no guarantee we’ll make it that way to heaven. And always remember we can only get there by what Jesus Christ did by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead. And we can only receive that forgiveness and transformation by repenting of our sins, believing in the Jesus of the Bible and surrendering to go His way rather than ours or what is popular around us.

C. Our deep longings are for heaven

Humans have always had deep longings for heaven, that’s why we need to think about heaven, talk about heaven and dream about heaven. When we grasp the fact that God is using this life so we, as His adopted children, can enjoy heaven more, then we are better able to love, obey, serve and enjoy the Lord NOW. All flowers, trees, rivers, fish around us are going to be experienced in a greater way in heaven. All the laughter, bonding, and meaningful conversation is but a faint picture of how special relationships will be in heaven. The creativity, stimulated intellect, and satisfaction in a job well is but a shadow of similar things in heaven. Heaven is a wonderful PLACE where we will have peace, justice and love for eternity.

D. Using our God-given imagination

One simple challenge for this week: let your mind dream about heaven – especially as a home Jesus has specially prepared for you. What about your ideal of picture of home now would you love to have in heaven? Let the little enjoyable things of life, trigger your God-given imagination. Dream about a place specially prepared for you by Jesus. Let’s not live like Heaven is a myth, or an impossible dream, or a relentlessly dull meeting or an unimportant distraction from real life. We need to see Heaven for what it really is: the HOME we are meant for. If we do, we’ll embrace our future after death with contagious joy, excitement and anticipation.

IV. Conclusion – “Do you see the shore clearly?”

Perhaps you are currently very burdened, discouraged, depressed or even traumatized like we sometimes feel when a loved one dies. Maybe your dreams have fallen apart. Maybe bitterness has started to enslave you. A Biblical understanding of the joys of heaven give us the strength to keep going when all else is gone.

In 1952, young Florence Chadwick stepped into the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island. She had already been the first woman to swim the English channel both ways – now she was determined to go even further – all the way from Catalina Island to the shore of California. The day was cold and foggy – Florence Chadwick could hardly see the boats that accompanied her. Still she swam for 15 hours. Then she begged to be taken out of the water. Her mother came up to her in one of those little boats and told her she was close, she could make it. Florence tried going a little further but was so discouraged and exhausted she just stopped swimming so they pulled her out of the water. It wasn’t until she was in the boat that she discovered she was less than ½ mile from the shore. At the news conference the next day she said, “All I could see was the fog ... I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.”
Think about those words – *I think I could have made it if I could have seen the shore* – For believers that shore is heaven and our being with Jesus for eternity. This is a broken world and we simply will not have the endurance we need without a compelling Biblical picture of heaven. I want all of us to be able to overcome the obstacles before us in the power of Jesus!