John 14:1-3
Memorial Service of Bill Hamilton
September 19, 2008

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (NIV)

When Bill greeted me this past Sunday morning on the sidewalk outside church and shook my hand, I noticed that in his other hand he was holding a pair of pliers. Considering it was Bill, that was hardly as peculiar as one might think. He explained that he was going to reset the timers on some of the outside lights at church, as the decreasing daylight meant that the lights needed to come on sooner.

I already mentioned one of the things for which I will always remember Bill—his love of food. Another is his love and care for this building and its grounds. If a light bulb was out, he would make sure that it was replaced immediately. If the church sign was vandalized, Bill was out here cleaning up the mess and making sure that the new sign was up soon.

Bill treated this place and kept it up as if it was his own house. But that wasn’t because Bill liked to have a nice place to come to on Sunday mornings. He had a bigger reason than that. His reason was that this is the Lord’s house, and he believed that God was worthy of having a house that was properly maintained—a house whose outward appearance would indicate that its occupant was something special.

It wasn’t easy, of course. It took constant vigilance and maintenance. Paint chips, roofs leak, vandals vandalize, and cockroaches…roach.

It’s an imperfect world, prone to all these sorts of things. And Bill knew how this world got to be so imperfect.

He made it that way. Oh, the state of the world wasn’t entirely Bill’s fault. It’s also my fault. And your fault. And Adam and Eve’s fault.

Ever since Adam and Eve took the “house” that God had built for them—that is, the Garden of Eden—and corrupted it with sin—buildings have weakened, decayed, and even collapsed—along with bodies, relationships, and lives. All these things have been corrupted and at times destroyed by the sins you and I and Bill have committed.

And the biggest thing that was destroyed was our relationship with God. If you think Bill hated seeing a burnt-out light bulb here on Sunday morning, you still can’t begin to imagine how much God hates seeing a sin-darkened soul, a midnight-black statement of rebellion against him and his commands.

And that is something that neither you nor I can fix. Not even Bill, with all his skill with tools, had the ability to piece together our shattered relationship with God. Not even Bill, with all his gentle charm, could undo the damage done by his violent sins against God.

It would truly seem that our hearts should be troubled this morning—especially as we consider the fact that this past Sunday morning Bill stood face-to-face with God.

But it turns out that Jesus is pretty good with repair work, too. For 33 years he lived a pristine, spotless life of obedience to God’s commands, and then he took that shining life and placed it over the graffiti-stained lives we had crafted.

Then he willingly allowed himself to be nailed to a cross—not so much for the purpose of being mocked by the crowd and rejected by his countrymen, but truly for the
purpose of being rejected by God. He received the rejection that we deserved to experience eternally.

And then he died. And that hardly seems to be a happy ending any more than what happened to Bill here on Sunday morning seems to be a happy ending.

But it didn’t end that way for Jesus, because on Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead. He spent 40 more days with his disciples, and then disappeared again, this time ascending into Heaven.

But he explained in our text what he’s doing there. He’s preparing a place for us. He paid for that place with his holy, precious blood, he made sure that we were fit to enter that place when he gave us his righteousness, and now he’s making sure that that place is just right for us.

I like the image of Jesus preparing a place for us, making sure that everything is just right for us. I know—there are surely no burnt-out light bulbs for Jesus to fix as he prepares a place for us in Heaven. Revelation tells us that the City of God needs no light, for the Son himself is its light. (Revelation 21:23) Neither is Jesus replacing a vandalized nameplate on the door of our place in Heaven, for it is a place without sin and therefore a place without vandalism.

And yet I like the notion that Jesus is so actively, so personally involved in preparing my place in Heaven.

Funny—during all the time that Bill devoted to taking care of Jesus’ house here on earth, Jesus was devoting to preparing Bill’s place in heaven.

Of course, Bill knew all that. That was why he was so committed to caring for Jesus’ house here on earth—not because he expected that by doing so he was earning his way into heaven, but rather because he wanted to show his gratitude that he already had a place in heaven.

Sunday morning, that place was ready, and so Jesus kept his promise to take Bill to the place that he had prepared specially for him.

So where does all of this leave us today? I suppose it leaves us in the place—or places—where my kids were on Sunday afternoon. I sat down with them and said, “You know how we said at the beginning of church this morning that Mr. Hamilton was sick?” My daughter said, “Yes—Mr. Hamilton died.” I asked her, “Do you know what that means?” She said, “He went up to heaven.” And that is what it means. It means that our loved one is now in the place that Jesus has prepared for him.

At that point my son said, “I know—but I’m going to miss him. He was nice. I liked it better when he was here.” Us, too—right? (And not just because we’re wondering who’s going to think to change the timers on the lights.)

But as heartfelt and as well-said as their words might have been, there are even more encouraging words. They are words from the Bible that assure you that when Jesus ascended into Heaven, he also went to prepare a place for you. Some day soon, Jesus will be finished preparing that place, and he will take you to be with him in Heaven. Then we will no longer miss Bill, for we will be in Heaven with him. And even better still, all of us will be with Jesus.

Let’s give the last word to the Holy Spirit: We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him...The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:14, 16-18) Amen.