Fifth Sunday of Easter, Daniel Tate  
**Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14**

In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.   
 At the beginning of our gospel today Jesus says, “Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”  
 “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The disciples are anxious. Jesus says, “You know where I am going, and I am going to prepare a place for you.” Thomas says, “We don’t know where you’re going.” Philip says, “Show us the father.” They have been together; they have been following him for three years. Things are supposed to be getting better, not worse. The world is closing in on them. What they are experiencing is anticipatory grief. Jesus is doing them a favor by talking about his leaving. They are in denial some of the time. They know something is up. They don’t want anything to be happening. They don’t want change. Jesus is easing them into it.   
 Anticipatory grief includes sadness, preparing for the death, beginning to adjust to upcoming changes, taking care of unfinished business, saying goodbyes. Making a will. Preparing advanced directives in case you lose your mind and can’t make decisions on your own in the hospital. It doesn’t mean that the pain will be lessor after the person dies, but I think it helps, it allows for a fuller grief to occur after the death.   
 Grief that follows an unplanned or sudden death, is different from coming grief. It can be overwhelming, making the loss difficult to accept. Life might not make sense afterward. This can cause trauma, or even PTSD. Jesus was giving his friends a chance to prepare for his leaving.   
 During the pandemic that we are now living through, anticipatory grief is being cut off. I’m doing a chaplain internship right now at Stanford Hospital and most of the time families are not allowed to be in the hospital when their loved one is dying. At the beginning of the pandemic no family members, no friends were allowed. No visitors in general are allowed in hospitals, for fear that people who are carriers of the virus might infect the whole hospital. Now, with special permission, one family member is allowed, and only one, and when they leave, they can’t come back. Record numbers of people are dying in hospitals now alone. Families don’t have the opportunity to say goodbye. They can do it by telephone, or facetime or zoom, but it’s not the same. And people who don’t speak English, are having an even more difficult time.   
 Because of social or physical distancing, all grief is being postponed, both individually and collectively. In our past, our nation, has risen up and mourned almost immediately after a disaster. After the twin tower murders in New York on 9/11, after the Boston marathon bombing, and after the Tree of Life synagogue shootings, people gathered and piled flowers, brought pictures and mementos. Memorial services were quickly put together.   
 That isn’t happening the same way now. We can’t gather publicly or in church. We are finding some ways to gather, we are being creative, using social media, but it’s not the same. Also, the pandemic is being politized, distracting us from our grieving. And a higher percentage of the deaths are happening to people who are less fortunate, the poor, the elderly trapped in retirement communities, those in prison; the front line workers, those who don’t have the luxury of staying home, sheltering in place, those who don’t have savings enough to wait it out until a cure is found.   
 And it’s not just our sadness’s, our griefs that are being cut off. Our joys too are being subdued. Mothers in hospitals are giving birth alone. Things are loosening a little now, but mostly husbands and family and friends can’t gather as a group to welcome new born’s with their mothers.   
 These collective griefs are building up, and they will be known to us one way or another in the future. Grief will show itself eventually. Something will happen.   
 So, Jesus was doing his disciples a favor by trying to help them through the transition. In fact, Jesus does this for three more chapters in John, eating with them, offering them peace, giving them final teachings, encouraging them and praying for them. Even though he will die a violent death, they will have some preparation. Jesus is preparing them well. It helps too that he is telling them that he is going to prepare a place for them. But he also says that they need to believe in God and believe in Him. Belief is what it all turns on. Belief that God is in control, that God loves us no matter the suffering we go though when loved ones die, no matter what our fears and troubles. Belief that all things work together for good for those that love God, even though we can’t grieve properly yet, that we can’t gather into community yet, and despite the fact that the economy is sliding into great depression. We are in a troubling time. But Jesus says do not let your hearts be troubled.   
 “I am going to prepare a place for you that has many dwelling places.” Jesus is talking about heaven, about hospitality. Jesus is going to die. He is going to go away. He is going to come back, resurrect and then he will raise up to heaven. He is asking us also to believe that the place he is going is a place that we too will be able to go to after we die. Again, believing is the thing. Believing that there is such a place. It’s up to each of us to believe, to imagine what that place will be like for ourselves.  
 Personally, I believe that we will be raised from the dead in bodies like our own but different. We will go to a garden like place, or a place near water, a place where we go to see the loved ones who have gone before us and to see also those we have not yet known or met, who we will love in the time to come. It is a place where our bodies will be free of disease, and yet the scars that we had in this life will be visible. It is a place where our bodies will be both our younger and older selves all at once. And if we see someone who died too young, we will see them both in their youth and in their unfulfilled maturity.   
 Eternal life, life after death, the resurrection of our lives is similar to the life we live now, but it is not. It is more, and it is something more than I can imagine. When we live in the present, when we feel the collapse of time during religious experiences, or in the emotions of great joy or love or happiness, or slide into great grief or trauma, or extreme illness, we might be seeing what life is like after death.   
 I believe that there is great variety in the afterlife, something for some reason people greatly fear. People fear difference. I think that is what Jesus is talking about when he says he is preparing many dwelling places. Our reading from First Peter says, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” “But you are a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people.” God gathers all peoples, all types, all varieties, all races, all conditions, together to dwell in safety in the many places that Jesus says he is preparing for us.   
 But what about those crushed into negative behaviors that the systems of the world have pressed them into? I would like to think that God would free even the worst of individuals from themselves after they die. In First Corinthians (15:42-44), Paul says, “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.”  
 In the Old Testament, after his trials Job says, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Job 19:25-27). Job’s flesh as it is will have to be destroyed, and after that he will have new flesh and then he will see God. Job in his experience sees in his suffering, glimpses of what resurrection is like.   
 Grief is a primary vehicle. All throughout scripture, grief acts as a conduit, a telescope for a look into the eternal. That which we call suffering and pain now are sometimes necessary and are doorways to the wonders we will experience after death.   
 In our first reading Stephen, the first martyr, while he is being stoned sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He believed in God so strongly that being stoned was nothing to him. What’s interesting in this passage is that the young Saul, the future Paul, is witness to Stephen’s death. He is there supporting it. This event though, no doubt worked on Saul. I think that our beliefs, just by our witness, by who we are has an impact on those around us. Because for some, it is very difficult to believe. Thomas had a hard time believing. But he was surrounded by a community that did believe. And Jesus helped him believe. That’s the beauty of Jesus’ message in our gospel. We don’t have to do it alone, even during the pandemic. Our second reading from 1 Peter alludes to this. It says, “Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.” If we believe, if we open ourselves, we can be built by God through God’s grace working in us. We need to focus. Jesus says believe in God and believe in me and you will not be troubled.   
 So, Have a Happy Mother’s Day! This work I’ve been doing at the hospital and this Mother’s Day have been making me think about my mother. She was a nurse and so I spent a lot of time in hospitals growing up. My dad was a chaplain’s assistant in the army, and he was a pastor for a while, so I’ve been thinking about him too. They’re both gone now, so I’ve been thinking about that grief some too.   
 Happy Mother’s Day! Go forth and live! Have fun! Eat something tasty. Go outside. Give thanks. Focus on the good. Be not troubled as Jesus says. Believe in God. God loves us no matter what.