

0A Easter 5 5.7.23

John 14:1-14

Focus Statement: Jesus is always with us.

If you have ever been to a funeral I have presided at, odds are good you have heard me preach on this text before. Some of you have heard me preach a LOT of times on this text before, because you've been to a fair number of the funerals I've been part of over the years. So before we rehash a text we all know really well, I want to just jump to the point and get real with you, and tell you the story of the first time I encountered this text pastorally. We're going there fast, so here we go.

I was less than six months into my first call in southern California, when I got a call early one Saturday morning that a young man in the congregation, a high school senior, had been killed by a drunk driver the night before. He hadn't been drinking, he wasn't even driving at the time of the accident. He was getting out of his parked car on the side of the road when another driver took the turn too fast, side-swiped him, and killed him instantly.

So I showed up at their house, because that's what you're supposed to do when you're the pastor, and we sat in the backyard, me, his siblings, his grieving parents, and we just sat there. And I had nothing to say, because there is nothing to say in moments like that. There are no words that can help at all less than twelve hours after you have lost everything. But, I'm the pastor, I'm supposed to say something. So I got out my Bible, fumbled around a bit, and settled on these words, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am,

there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" On and on I read, honestly unsure where or how to stop. I have no idea if this was comforting at all to them, if this helped, if they even heard the words I was saying. But I can tell you this, these were the words I needed to hear. These were the words that got me through that horrible, painful, doubting, questioning time. The words that held my grief so that I could sit with them in theirs, this unshakeable promise of Jesus that he was with them, with us. This text does that, it sits with us in grief and pain and hurt, because that is what Jesus intended for those words to do. That is what Jesus was doing when he said them to his disciples. To give them a floor when the ground they stood on had fallen out from under them.

This text comes from what is known as the Farewell Discourse, Jesus' final words to his disciples on the night of his betrayal. Immediately before this is the story we read on Maundy Thursday, of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and wiping them with his hair. Of Peter's protests, you'll never wash my feet, oh my gosh, wash all of me. Of Judas's betrayal, of the command to love, of Peter's insistence that he'll follow Jesus anywhere, a commitment we know lasts less than ten hours. In John's Gospel there is a pattern of event—Jesus does a thing, dialogue—Jesus has conversation with others about the thing, discourse—Jesus talks more deeply about the theology behind the thing. This passage follows that pattern somewhat. The event is the foot washing, the dialogue the back and forth with Peter and Judas, and now we're into the discourse. Chapter fourteen is a shift in

audience to all the disciples. Even when Jesus was answering Thomas and Philip's questions, these were words meant to be overheard.

Jesus was explaining to them what was meant by the foot washing, but he's also doing more than that. Something that you can see in their questions they do not understand yet, because it hasn't happened yet. The event Jesus is addressing in these words, the event whose significance he's explaining to them is the event of his death, resurrection, and ascension. In these words, Jesus is giving them assurance in their grief. This doesn't make sense to them yet because they do not know yet that they are going to be grieving. But Jesus did, and so before they are, he gave them what they would need to get through, he gave them this promise of his presence.

Jesus starts these words with this powerful message of strength, do not let your hearts be troubled. And let's unpack this for a moment and talk about what Jesus meant by the word "troubled" because there isn't a good English translation, and you have to know how Jesus used it. Jesus talked about his heart being troubled when he saw Mary weeping at Lazarus' tomb, when he contemplated his upcoming hour, and just a few moments before at Judas's betrayal. In all of those cases, a troubled heart referred to Jesus being upset in the face of the powers of evil and death. And in all of those cases, Jesus walked right through and destroyed that power, raising Lazarus from the dead, embracing his hour, sending Judas to do his work. So this call to not be troubled is not a command to not feel sad or scared or angry. This is a rallying cry for strength and courage in the middle of those feelings. To have those feelings, to feel sad or mad or scared and to do what needs to be done anyway,

trusting that Jesus Christ is both with you and ahead of you in all that you feel and all that you are facing. That is what Jesus wanted for his disciples. To, when they felt the very real loss of his physical, incarnate presence with them, to trust that he had conquered death and evil, and they could miss him and miss his presence with them and still go on. That they could live because he had destroyed the power of death.

My grandmother was a quilter. For her 90th birthday my parents threw her a quilt show with over two hundred pieces, and when she died the quilts were parsed out to the whole family. Quilts are the only art up in my house, all from my grandmother's private collection. My mother's favorite quilt hangs at my parents' house, it's a patchwork of green squares with bright red flowers appliqued across it. All her quilts had titles, and the name of that one, written on the back in her Kansas farmgirl scrawl, He Didn't Promise Me a Rose Garden. My grandmother was born in Dustbowl Kansas, she met and married my grandfather, he was even poorer than her, and whisked her away to California where he had a job with Lockheed Martin. The engagement was so quick that she didn't come to learn one important fact about his family, the reason they were poor was early onset Alzheimer's. My grandfather couldn't hold a job past forty, he was gone before he turned sixty. My grandmother was tough as nails and not prone to show emotions. The quilt was a testament, in her own stubborn way, that life with my grandfather had been hard, but he'd given her all he had.

Dear people of God, here is the hard truth that we all know, life happens, and it is not all good. Life can be beautiful and amazing and joyful, and life can be so so hard and painful.

Just because you are a follower of Jesus does not stop life from happening. There will be mountain-tops—last week we heard about how Peter brought three thousand people to Jesus in a single sermon, that had to have felt pretty amazing. There will be valleys—like I alluded to earlier, Peter’s going to hear that cock crow less than ten hours from Jesus saying these words and know just how horribly he’d screwed up. There will be fear, we’re three days out from the disciples in the locked room, and there will be rejoicing, like the disciples did when they realized Jesus was among them. All of that, the whole spectrum of our lived experiences, every joy and heartbreak, every time you laugh until it hurts and every time you feel yourself being crushed, in every single one of those moments, there too is Jesus. It’s easier in the good ones to feel Christ’s presence, which is why Jesus prepared the disciples, prepares us, with these words. So that we can read them again and again, hold them close, say them to each other, hold them for each other, and know that we know the place to where we are going, that the place where we are going is the place where we have always been, a place in the Father’s own heart. Where Jesus is, there we are also, and where we are, there too is Jesus. No matter where you are, no matter what is happening, no matter what joy or struggle you walk through today, have walked through in the past, will walk through tomorrow, there too is Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.