

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, A
Acts 7:55-60
I Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

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Grace and peace to all our many dwelling places. It's a miracle, really, that technology can bring us together from so many different places: apartments, houses, offices, assisted living centers, patios and porches, kitchen tables, living room couches.

Our various dwelling places are as different as we are – the only thing they have in common might be more than the usual supply of rice, beans and toilet paper. And the fact they're cleaner than they were two months ago, since we are staying home and can't ignore the streaky windows and grungy stove burners. We are coming to terms with our dwellings and making the best of them. Some of our dwellings are crowded with family members, so there's never a moment alone as we juggle schedules and work hard at getting along. Some are exactly the opposite, so very quiet, empty of good company to relax into. Whether our home life is overwhelming or tedious, or somewhere in between... our hearts go out to those with no shelter, and we pray for their protection.

We are really grateful for our dwelling places, and we are also... getting tired of them. Missing what used to be normal. Grieving simple pleasures like singing in harmony or cheering with a crowd. It's going to be awhile, we are realizing, and we are reaching deep for patience right now. As Dr. Fauci warns: *We don't make the timeline. The virus makes the timeline.* We hate this.

But God has a good word for us, right here and right now. Into our personal anxiety and grief, into our whole world's worry and stress, come the words of Jesus: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you."*

Jesus was speaking to people who knew what trouble was. He spoke to the disciples after the Last Supper, just before he was betrayed, abandoned, tortured and killed. The disciples knew trouble already and would soon know even more. Yet Jesus said, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. I am preparing a place for you, a place of hope and courage and love and trust."*

We've often heard this as a promise of life after death, Jesus preparing a place for us in heaven someday. We read this scripture at funerals, remembering that death is no barrier for God. Beyond the end of life on earth, we live with God for all eternity. When we lose a loved one, or when we ourselves are facing death, God's gift of life everlasting means

everything. And at this particular moment in history, when pandemic death tallies are an everyday news item, the promise of life after death shines with good news.

But Jesus means to give us *even more* good news. Because life with God isn't just some day or someplace far away. In fact, it's not a place at all, but a relationship of love that is real, right now, and right here.

On some level, we might have the idea that to be truly close to God, we would need to be in some other dwelling place than these apartments and homes we live in today. Not a dwelling place with clouds and pearly gates, necessarily, but someplace removed from these four walls we've been stuck in for weeks. Someplace removed from loneliness and family conflict, removed from worry and illness and fear and confusion. On so many levels, we doubt that God could ever make something holy out of the messy, mixed up, so-very-human troubles we are dwelling with.

But there is no mistake. Today we are living in the place Jesus has prepared for us. We are living in the loving, forgiving, resilient, hope-filled, everlasting relationship that is ours now and always, no matter what. God is right here with us in the mess. And right here, Christ says with surpassing love: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled."*

How is that possible, not to be troubled to our very core these days? It's possible because God has made a home for us. A home for our troubled hearts. A home for our pent-up energy and creativity. A home for our fears and questions, a home for our longings for peace and justice and healing. No matter where we may physically dwell – hotel rooms, nursing homes, temporary shelters -- we always dwell with God. God dwells in your home and in mine. We ask God to help us experience this relationship, to preserve our spirits, to center us in moments of wisdom, to settle us in moments of peace or comfort, to give us the kindness and love and courage and patience we need to navigate the week to come.

When I hear Jesus speak of how there are many dwelling places in God's household... I hear many levels of promise. I hear a promise for us this morning, that our homes are some of the many dwelling places where God lives. That while we are separated physically, we are united cosmically in Christ. It isn't only technology that connects us this morning. Really it is God's Holy Spirit who woke us up with a desire to worship today, who calls us together and bridges the distance between us.

I hear a promise for the various faith traditions around our world, different pathways people travel to seek One God. I am really grateful that in recent years we are learning to respect these various traditions and honor them as dwelling places for God's Spirit – the same Spirit we know through Jesus Christ. In scripture I hear Jesus speaking a word of invitation that is loving and kind, not judgmental: "In God's house there is all kinds of

room, plenty of room, for you and for others.” It’s not about exclusion – it’s about inviting people in. And even more, Jesus seems to be saying, *“Whenever anyone comes to know the God of All, it’s my love that brings that about.”* Perhaps it truly is all the same infinite divine love, expressed in various cultural languages, through the Creator’s genius.

I want us to really hear our Lord’s welcoming tone as he says “I am the way, the truth, the life.” Jesus opens a beautiful way to God. What a grace, what a blessing.

And I wonder what this expansive, loving relationship can accomplish in us, even amid today’s constraints. A friend observed that right now we are each living in postage-stamp size worlds. We have a living space and not much more. And maybe that is enough, for now. It could be that where we are planted is our journey, for this moment. Our own home space contains a universe of opportunities to serve God and bless others.

It’s beautiful to remember that God can always work something good in and through us. In fact, Jesus expressed amazing confidence in those who would follow his way. Jesus said: *“Truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these.”* Works of holy love, works of hope and courage and faith.

On days when we might feel like we’re getting nowhere, or can’t see the path ahead because our plans for the future have been upended – it’s good to remember that our Lord has confidence in us. That Jesus is our way forward, helping us do the next right thing. It could even be that God is using our vulnerability and limitations to work a blessing for others. It could be that this time of collective need is opening up some opportunities that didn’t exist before... may God give us eyes to see and ways to respond.

A woman attended the funeral of a family friend. As stopped to speak with the daughter, she said what was on her heart: *“Your mother was just so good at loving people.”* Then she wondered to herself: *Is there really anything else? Besides love?*

She was going through a time of deep grief herself, grief on top of grief, grief all the way down, as she expressed it. A lot of people know what that is, today. But she reflected that love was the one thing that could matter, in the face of life’s cruelty. To be ridiculously committed to loving people. She reflected that *“love never rescues anyone from death, of course, but it covers them, nurtures them, it consumes them in a way that always matters completely.... We can choose to love fiercely, generously, lavishly. We can embrace the hard work of loving fiercely, praying, honoring, and grieving, in patience and hope that love will survive.”* (Dr. Erin Raffety, workingpreacher.org, 5/10/2020)

Perhaps that’s what it means to be a dwelling place, to live in God and God in us. God’s Spirit is nurturing in all of God’s people a love that is fierce and generous and lavish.

May it be so for us. Amen.