

Our Gospel text this morning is familiar.
 The second half of the passage,
 beginning with Philip's request,
 "Lord, show us the Father," was the text
 exactly a year ago on Pentecost.
 The first half,
 "Do not let your hearts be troubled,"
 is heard at funerals and memorial services.
 In fact, it was the basis of my homily at the service
 for Mary Franz here less than two months ago.
 "In my Father's house are many dwelling places ...
 I go to prepare a place for you."
 Even in times of deep mourning,
 Jesus' words have the power to comfort.
 They comfort us contemplating our own dying.
 But our task today is to bring the power of Jesus
 to bear in time of ordinary living,
 which in the context of "Finding Our Way" means
 determining the present value of eternal life. ■
 As comforting as we may find the words
 "Do not let your hearts be troubled,"
 Jesus' disciples gathered together that night
 in an upper room find no balm in them at all.
 They are devastated at three references in a row
 to "I go to prepare a place ... you know the way."
 Leave it to Thomas to ask the question
 you and I would want Jesus to answer:
 Lord, we do not know where you are going.
 How can we know the way?
 You are speaking in riddles.
 What you say sounds terrible.
 It sounds like you're quitting.
 Have we no future together?
 Are you dismissing us as disciples?
 Perhaps some around the table think back
 to what Jesus said in verse 33 of the last chapter
 (you know Jesus talked in chapter and verse),
 "I am with you a little while longer."
 Did you mean a little longer at this meal, tonight?

Or did you mean, a little longer, in the world?
 When Thomas asks his question,
 the disciples have been in a room with Jesus
 for an entire evening of fellowship.
 It's been a very private meal,
 even claustrophobic,
 just Jesus and his twelve most loyal men.
 Thomas is one of those twelve.
 The tension in the upper room has been building.
 I expect the women disciples
 have prepared a sumptuous banquet.
 They have roasted a lamb for the Passover.
 They have baked unleavened bread.
 They have filled the wine goblets.
 They've lit the room with candles
 and are standing attentively near the stairs
 to bring up whatever the men may need.
 Jesus is the center of attention.
 But he has acted and spoken strangely.
 First he washed the disciples' feet,
 an act of humility that made the men uncomfortable.
 This was their Master, after all.
 Addressing the whole group, Jesus explained:
 "You brothers are clean enough
 except your feet. But not all of you are clean."
 That raised the tension in the room.
 Jesus put his garments back on
 and reclined to start the meal.
 His next remarks were probably responses
 to various questions from the disciples.
 "You also ought to wash one another's feet...
 "A slave is not greater than a master,
 an envoy is not greater
 than the one who sends him...
 "Heed my words. Evil will befall me."
 In my bible, the red print is interrupted here
 for the gospel writer to note:
 When Jesus said this,
 he became *troubled in spirit*.

Jesus reacted, in other words,
to his own prophecy in a very human way.
He was troubled at what would happen to him.
Perhaps to share the scare, he said solemnly,
"It is one of you, my friends, who will betray me."
There was much murmuring in the room.
Peter whispered to the beloved disciple,
whose head was leaning against Jesus' heart,
"Find out who Jesus means."
For emphasis, Jesus dipped a morsel of bread
in some meat juice and handed it to Judas:
"Do what you've got to do, and do it quickly."
Judas vanished in the night,
to the puzzlement of the remaining Eleven.
"Little children," Jesus finally told them,
"I am with you a little while longer.
You will look for me,
but where I am going you cannot come.
So I leave you with this final thought:
Love one another as I have loved you."
Peter was stuck back on "you cannot come."
Glancing around the room
to see if he spoke for all, Peter asked,
"Where are you going, Lord?"
Jesus repeated himself: "Where I am going,
you cannot follow, now.
But you will follow later."
Peter protested and vowed on his very life
to follow Jesus.
The answer was "The rooster will not crow
until you deny me three times, Peter."
So that was the scene leading up to today's text. ■

Jesus is acting and speaking in an ominous way,
as if the future that the disciples had imagined
with their marvelous healer and teacher
were going away.
Have you experienced that kind of
disappointment?

How did you feel when someone said,
"It's going to be all right.
Do not let your heart be troubled.
Have faith in God."
Finding Our Way out of a place of deep loss
takes more than a cliché.
It takes hard work through deep pain.
Like the path from Good Friday
to Resurrection Sunday, the way back from loss
is best found with companions.
And maybe, if we take time to work the process,
we might look back and see the good news in loss.
Thomas' question still haunts us:
"How can we know the way?"
We recognize in the question our own anxiety,
fear, disappointment, and even depression.
Finding Our Way is not as easy as walking
the criss-crossing paths of Sunken Gardens,
as Marge and I did this week in St. Petersburg.
We had signs to tell us where we were on a map.
Curiously, though, the sign that popped up
most often along the path was "Exit This Way."
I remembered times when I groped my way
through depression, how often I was tempted
to take the first Exit sign
and skip the rest of the healing process,
which necessarily involves further disorientation.
Christians can be so unhelpful to someone
who is groping for the way back to normalcy.
"God doesn't give you more than you can handle."
"When one door closes, another opens."
Especially in matters of dying and death,
for which Christians ought to be well-prepared,
glib clichés offer no light in someone's darkness.
Alabama pastor Thomas Lane Butts has preached,
"As Christians we learn how to face death.
All persons of faith (or no faith) will face death.
The difference is that the Christian has the tools
with which to understand and face death."

Pastoral counselor Dr. Linda Filippi has written on the psychological truths of our Gospel text. She notes that Jesus invites intimacy with himself, and through him, with God.

In her experience with clients who are depressed, any radiance in the present times lies beneath a blanket of experience soddened with loss.

Sufferers of clinical depression lose touch with a core truth of incarnation and resurrection. God dwelled in Jesus. God still dwells in Jesus. Jesus of the Gospels leads a God-centered life. God is at his center.

"Jesus was totally open, vulnerable, and responsive to God's call."

Jesus claims that his words come not from him but from the authority of God who dwells in him.

"Persons who are depressed," Dr. Filippi writes, "locate power and authority outside themselves." (I know from experience that a lot of energy goes to placing blame and ducking responsibility. It's easy to blame God, who feels far-removed.)

In Filippi's Christian approach to clinical depression,

"accepting the indwelling presence of Jesus becomes the way to recovery of abundant life.

"We respond to God at the center of our being.

"Trusting in God, we learn to trust in ourselves."

That's the truth of incarnation –

God dwells in Christ, who dwells in us. ■

Jesus is trying to get the disciples to the point of trusting that he will not abandon them when he returns to the Father's house.

But the disciples, like Philip, feel cheated.

"Lord, show us the Father and we'll be satisfied."

I take some reassurance in Philip's confusion.

I mean, if an eyewitness to Jesus and his mission can't see God's work in everything Jesus does, how can God expect me to accept it?

Finding Our Way to eternal life through only the words of Jesus is futile.

"Lord, we don't even know where you are going."

Even words so familiar as John 14 are enigmatic.

Most of the time, we hear "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" with no comprehension.

So we must also find our way through action.

We must experience Jesus dwelling with us, in us.

A theological term for that is "witness."

The many "I AM" statements of Jesus help us to witness the reality of his incarnation.

I am the bread of life, come down from heaven.

I am the light of the world.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the vine, you are the branches.

I am with you.

The very fact that the Risen Jesus exists,

in Saint Stephen's memorable words,

"standing there at the right hand of God,"

should be enough to lift us out of personal loss.

Indeed, it should lift the world's depression.

Our First Reading from Acts 7 omits

the full-length sermon of Stephen

that riles up a crowd to kill him by stoning.

That sermon covers God's salvation history

from the call of Abraham

through the reign of David.

But the sermon is not why we remember Stephen.

Those are mere words.

We remember Stephen

for his witness to the living God in the living Son.

This is the terrifying, stirring, *thrilling* Good News.

Jesus IS, God IS, and Jesus IS God.

"I am the Way."

Not one of many ways, but THE way.

That mantra has lifted me personally

out of many a dark night of the soul.

It has meant, I am the way out of your dilemma.

I am the way to your peace and wholeness.
I am the way to your purpose in life.
Finding our purpose in the person of Jesus
links us spiritually with the throngs
who clamored around Jesus
for a way out of their darkness.

"I am the Truth."

The Jesus we know
does not speak about truth, but IS truth.
The Jesus we know
does not philosophize about truth,
but embodies truth in presence and thought.
That Jesus lived, and died, and lives on
is the central truth of the world's existence.

"I am the Life."

Not just ordinary mortal life,
but perfect, eternal life.
Life in an unimaginable state of grace.
The prologue of John's gospel says it best:
"In the Word was life,
and the life was the light of humanity.
The light still shines in the world's darkness,
but the world has never comprehended."
I pray that each of you finds your way,
as I am finding mine.
Amen.