

A place for us

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 3 2026

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16, John 14:1–14

Rev Gillean MacLean, locum minister

Prayer

Lord God,

*We are all a part of your beautiful creation,
each one unique and precious.*

We come with different needs, ideas and personalities.

*So, send your Holy Spirit to every heart and soul
to guide our thoughts*

*and inform these reflections on your word,
that we might honour you and each other
in Jesus name. Amen.*

Like most people, at home in Inverness, despite a huge pre-retirement clear-out, we have too many books, and try as I might I find it hard to get rid of any of them! And it's the only thing (apart from leaving my wee dog Banjo behind) I don't like about coming to preach away from home! I have to leave them all behind!

One of those many books is entitled *Heaven, A History*. On the cover there is a lovely image of a woman being ushered along in the embrace of a kindly looking angel. The woman's hands are clasped in supplication or prayer and she is looking into the eyes of her protector with trust. On its own it is a lovely and reassuring thing to see, but of course it comes from a larger work, *The Last Judgement* by the medieval artist Stefan Lochner.

That larger work shows the crowd of others waiting to be ushered in to the holiest of places. There is a bit of a crush, but the fringes of the work show angels cajoling and comforting and holding and kissing those who are waiting. They are loved!



Through an ornate door guarded by a variety of bishop-like figures and cherubic musicians, the crush continues into another place through the very gates of heaven.

Of course, the work seen in its entirety is much less reassuring, for the other side of the coin shows those who are not so fortunate being dragged off to the other place, while in the centre is Jesus who is being appealed to for assistance to save those who may be lost.

The book is of course a history, not of heaven itself, but of what we as future consumers, if you like, have imagined it might be like over the centuries. In my years of serving various types of congregations, I have had the experience of people asking me what it will be like in heaven,

and I have to say to them that I don't know, for I've never been. No one has been there and come back to tell the tale... Well, no one except Jesus of course!

The resurrection of our Lord is what many of us cling to as the proof that first of all, there is a place for us when we leave this earthly life, and that secondly, it will be a good place. But essentially, it's a matter of belief, because we don't really know from our own experience.

Our reading from John's Gospel sees Jesus reassuring his disciples that there will be a place for them at his side if only they will have faith.

I'm a great fan of Thomas, so-called doubting Thomas. I like him because he asks the kinds of questions that I would have liked to ask Jesus. I think in common with many others I'm a person who likes, like Thomas, to be able to see for myself.

If I'm going off somewhere I haven't been before I probably leave far too early. I check Google maps several times, have a look at the street view so that I know what the place looks like and then print off directions to take with me – and I take along a phone number just in case I get lost.

When Jesus tells the disciples that they know the way to the place where he is going, Thomas pipes up with, *"No we don't Lord, how can we know?"* Jesus tells Thomas that all he has to do is follow his way, believe in him and trust him and all will be well. I wonder if Thomas was convinced or if it took many hours of discussion and prayer and thought, perhaps even a lifetime, to reach that place of trust and faith we all yearn for.

This reading from the Gospel of John will be familiar to many people who have attended the Christian funeral of a friend or colleague or family member. Increasingly though, funerals are being led by a variety of others. You may have attended a thanksgiving for someone's life led by friends and family or by a humanist celebrant. These are often lovely and personal celebrations, and most ministers like to make their funeral services as personal and as beautiful as they can too. However, for me there is always something missing at a service that has no basis in faith.

No amount of lovely words or beautiful pieces of music can make up for the words of reassurance offered to us by Jesus in this reading from John's Gospel. *"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may also be."*

The word used in the Greek language for dwelling places was *monai*. The word means something like *'stages on the way'*, a sort of resting place before moving on to the next stage. And my book on the history of heaven describes the many stages on the way in our understanding and belief surrounding death and the after-life.

The ancient Jews of Jesus' day, for instance, believed that heaven consisted of a vast mansion with many rooms. Each person would be assigned a room according to how they had lived their lives. In more modern times that great writer and thinker CS Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce* describes heaven as a place where everything is so much more than we can ever imagine that for some the journey there is just too much, too glorious to handle.

Some religious groups teach and believe that only a certain number of people will be admitted to heaven and that we must work and strive throughout our lives to make sure that we are among that number.

The late much-loved Scottish theologian Willie Barclay plumps for the simple explanation of Jesus's words in our Gospel reading and suggests that maybe heaven is just a place where there is room for all. No one will be turned away.

Like most of you, I suspect, I don't begin to understand how God will sort out the good within us from the bad, how we will get to heaven or what it will look or feel like.

I don't begin to understand what it means for those faithful people of other religions who have lived good lives and have exhibited all the qualities that we as Christians most value.

What I do know with all my heart and see every day – in the beauty of creation, in the warmth of friendships and the delights of love, even in this time of uncertainty and difficulty in our world – what I do know is that God, that moving force that brought all of this into being, that God is good.

I believe with every fibre of my being that God is not a jealous or a vengeful God. Rather he is a God who embodies love.

I believe that on my many journeys, both physical and spiritual, the Holy Spirit walks with me.

So, I have decided, as Jesus said to his disciples all those many years ago to try, at least, not to worry and not to be anxious, for a much greater force than we will ever become is in charge.

No disaster is too terrible for God to overcome, no war, no terrorist, no evil force, nothing is ever able to defeat our God and God's love for us. All will be well, for God is love and God is supreme over all.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for I have redeemed you.

A prayer to conclude

God of life,

I offer you my life.

I place it at your feet,

you who understand everything about me.

For you are before me God, you are behind,

you are around me and within.

I offer you my little degree of faith;

along with that I bring you my doubts and my fears,

my sorrows and my joys,

for I know you will embrace them and nurse them

and make them your own.

Amen.