I have a rather intense, shameful memory that happened when I was 16 as an exchange student to Australia.  I profoundly stumbled and bumbled in a conversation with my host mother. Somehow the passage from the beginning of Ecclesiastes came up in discussion.. “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.” In the year previously in high school English class, we had read Ecclesiastes and compared it to Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha. Of course, I really had NO understanding of Ecclesiastes and promptly said how awful I thought it was… That was when my host mother (the woman who had opened her house to me for the year) looked at me wide-eyed and immediately tearful and explained that the passage had been read at her brother’s funeral. In retrospect, perhaps it was an appropriate reading for a death following a motorcycle accident.  I learned in those few brief moments, how not to criticize texts (particularly funeral texts), because someone else might hold them particularly dear.

Today’s Gospel is a funeral text for the Episcopal Church.  All the Gospel readings possible in the Episcopal rubric for funeral services come from the Gospel of John, but today’s passage I have found is often chosen. The passage is chosen typically because it provides words of comfort for a family. Additionally, it has been taken both as an exclusive membership to Christianity as God’s only chosen people (that ONLY by following Jesus is there salvation).  It has alternatively been taken as a basis for pluralism, an overarching acceptance by God of people of different faiths, as if the rooms were able to be equated to different faiths that are accommodated by God.

All that said, to me, it is more important that Jesus in this passage is showing us how to be in relationship with God. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me…I am the way, and the truth and the life.”  This is how we are to live.  And the process of living with God is not actually separate from how we are to die, with God. We have no life worth living if not for and with God. Martin Luther King, Jr.  once said that a person who “had nothing worth dying for, was not fit to live.” Throughout all of Jesus’s life he shows us how to live a life to God. He shows us the Way. It is no coincidence that early followers of Jesus were not called Christians but the Way.  Even the Hebrew word for “Way”, *derek*, gives the impression not just of path or road, but a way of being, a way of conducting oneself.   The psalm even speaks of this

Into your hands I commend my spirit, \*  
 for you have redeemed me,  
 O Lord, O God of truth.

If we commit or commend our lives and spirit to God, as Jesus, we have and show our utter dependence on God.

In sources other than scripture, this was best put by Jeremy Taylor, an Anglican Devine of the 1600s. He wrote a book, *Holy Living, Holy Dying*.  This is not just how as a hospice nurse once told me, “people die how they live.”  Death is ONLY the end of life, that is all it is. The art of dying, however, is the way in which you live. It is not a death bed confession.  Through Jesus and all the Saints that followed him, we are shown lives lived such that the lives push envelopes. Each life challenged the authorities to snuff it out because it was true and authentic and lived to God.  It is a threat to the establishment to be that God-centered.. This is *Ars moriendi*— how one dies… it is a continuum from life to death and then to life, Jesus shows us this.

I want to move for a second away from the view that sometimes seems to make Jesus’s death a transaction— specifically He died so that my sins are forgiven.  Think of the cross and resurrection as witness to the true nature of life, life as a loving and giving that cannot be defeated by death. So it is not so much that a transaction happens at the cross and empty tomb that gives you freedom, but that at the cross and tomb the power of freedom that comes from life lived authentically. Life lived as Jesus lived, is revealed as something unable to be defeated.   The empty tomb is not a mechanism that gave us something we didn't have before, but testimony and promise that true life, the only thing that life actually is, is sufficiently powerful to survive the grave.

There is no doubt that the spread of Christianity was and is spread by the Holy Spirit, but also that, perhaps ironically, people paid attention to a faith that was and is worth dying for. It was and is just that compelling.  And so it began with Stephen.

Jesus is the cornerstone to this life well lived to God.  The corner stone is just that. It is the stone laid in the building that has 90 degree angles. If it doesn’t have 90 degrees, the building collapses. If it does, it is stable and a building can be made. And the stones (all of us) have come to life.  And that building that is being laid and made is a building with many rooms. I do not so much believe in some compartmentalization of heaven, as if heaven were a giant condominium complex, but that this more describes relationship with God.  God has time and desire for relationship with us.  When Christians hang their hearts on God, they hang their hearts on Jesus, and not on the troubles the world brings, they follow the Way. And because you hang your heart on God as Jesus was and did, you have space and time and relationship with God. There is room for you, there is salvation.