

May 10, 2020
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Annie Pierpoint Mertz, Preacher
Sermon Preached via Facebook Live
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Benicia
Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

In the Hands of a Loving God

Nearly 2 months ago, at the beginning of this pandemic, I had a vision of what it would look like to reopen and come back to worship. We might organize a work party the Saturday before to dust off the cobwebs and air out the church. Our campus would be a busy place, with altar guild and flower guild buzzing around, channeling our collective joy and energy into polishing brass and arranging flowers. There would be moments of reconnection everywhere, as someone carrying a bouquet passes by a person with a bag of dried leaves. They would drop their loads for a hug and a check-in.

Tired but happy, we'd all go home and hardly sleep because of the excitement. Then, Sunday morning, the pews would be packed and we'd sing so loud we'd shake the rafters. There wouldn't be a dry eye in the house as we celebrated the Eucharist and shared the common cup. Coffee hour would go long into the afternoon and St. Paul's would have come back with a mighty roar.

Slowly, my grand dream has dissolved. I think I finally woke up a couple of weeks ago when, during a diocesan zoom call, Bishop Megan suggested we fire up our parish sewers because we're going to need a stash of masks to hand out when we resume Sunday worship.

There is still no big picture or grand plan of reopening, but there are some fuzzy details emerging in a big cloud of "maybe" and "we'll see." Socially

distanced pews. Perhaps an RSVP system. In-person worship with cameras and cords everywhere. Communion in one kind with masks and gloves. To be honest, I feel a little sting of pain at each one. Nothing like the pain of a rock flung by an angry mob member, but maybe like a little pebble.

There is something else I'm seeing, and I am both excited and scared to share it with all of you. I'm excited because it holds promise, and I'm scared because it involves change. I've learned in my personal spiritual journey that when something feels this way -- thrilling and terrifying -- God is usually behind it. And, in my experience, God always shows me a beloved community of people to walk with me. In case you're wondering, that's all of you.

Somewhere in the blur of the last couple of weeks, I read a quote that said "Resurrection is NOT resuscitation." My earlier vision of opening Sunday was of a resuscitated St. Paul's. The vision I'm seeing now is a resurrected St. Paul's. My friends, this pandemic has shaken the foundation of who we are as a church and as a nation. In a few weeks, we have had to completely reinvent what we do, and because of that we have a unique, singular opportunity to reinvent who we are. More than just an opportunity, I think we have an *obligation* to reinvent who we are. An obligation to God, to our neighbors, and to ourselves.

I think the central lesson from this pandemic is that this church is not a building. We have proven to ourselves that we can still follow Jesus, loving one another as he loved us without the rocks we may have clung to in the past. We are still worshipping God without a building. We still walked with Jesus through his death and resurrection during Holy Week. We can still be members of the Body of Christ without the Eucharist. To learn that we can survive without these foundational rocks -- our building, our holy week, our Eucharist -- has changed us and marked us. It has shown us that we cling to a rock that is far mightier than these. We cling to God.

And yet. There is so much pain and loss here. It would be a mistake for us to steamroll our way to a resurrected St. Paul's without mourning what has died.

Holy week teaches us that every year -- we cannot celebrate Easter without Good Friday. We will mark and memorialize the pain and suffering this community has endured during the pandemic, and we will memorialize the suffering of our neighbors and everyone on this planet.

But we must not tarry there. This opportunity, this *obligation* calls to us to be living stones. It calls us to place ourselves and our church into the hands of a loving God, to *let ourselves* be built into a spiritual house. We are not the builders. No human being is the architect -- not your Rector, not your vestry, nor anyone else. We know what happens when stones are placed in the hands of humans. At best we might build a shaky hovel -- at worst, we might forget to build anything at all and instead use the stones to kill and destroy each other.

But living stones in the hands of a loving God become a dwelling place unlike any we could possibly imagine. Bigger than any mansion. More welcoming than the finest 5-star hotel. More beautiful than the grandest cathedrals on earth.

When God is the architect, and people are the living stones, that's when you become a church. That's when St. Paul's, at the corner of 1st and J in Benicia, CA, becomes bigger than any mansion, more welcoming than the finest hotel, and as gorgeous and grand as any cathedral. It becomes a dwelling place designed by God and managed by a savior who fluffs the pillows and tucks the sheets for every guest because the Lord Jesus is not too high and mighty to do that kind of thing.

And, if you're like me, even with this beautiful vision, you're still wondering "how." How does a vision like that get translated into reality? How does that pie in the sky, that vision in Annie's head become our brick and mortar?

How, Lord, how will we know where you are leading us, how can we know the way? "I am the way. And the truth. And the life." Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it, "only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life."

That is the spiritual answer. The practical answer is it's not time yet to design a process and figure out "how" to rebuild. There is no book on congregational development to buy, no church town hall on a mission statement to attend, no major initiative launching today. Now it's time to dream and to wonder. I've been dreaming and wondering, and I want you to join me.

My beloved friends, there are changes ahead as we pursue the Jesus life. We are going to confront extraordinary challenges, and ask ourselves bizarre, previously unthinkable questions. How do we greet newcomers from behind a mask? How can we keep people in the church distant from one another? How do we share the love of God in a wafer given by a gloved hand? But we forge ahead, living stones in the hands of a loving God. Perhaps we were made for such a time as this.

Amen.