

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the third Sunday of Easter 2022: "the community that practices Resurrection"

Maybe it's just me, but does anyone else find themselves still a little dazzled and disoriented by the fact that we're again meeting in person here every Sunday?

I'm more than a little relieved. Not being able to celebrate Eucharist together, not observing the days of Passion and Resurrection with the special liturgies the church designates for those times, and not having the sort of fellowship with all of you where we can engage with each other face-to-face was difficult to put it mildly. I'm more than a little eager to put that as far behind us as possible.

But I cannot shake the feeling that through this experience we have all shared these last few years some uncomfortably big questions are being asked of us.

What exactly are we doing here? Why come here on a Sunday morning? Why church?

This is probably a bigger and weightier question than you may have wanted to wrestle with this morning, but I find myself asking big and weighty questions a lot these days.

In March of 2020 something happened that at least I had never before in my life experienced. Just about everyone I perceived as having authority over me-my bishop, my governor, and many others-was telling me to focus on singularly negative goals.

“Stop doing just about everything you reasonably can stop doing,” was the message, “and focus all of your energy on preventing a disaster.” Stop going to school, stop going to work, stop going to church, stop going to restaurants, parks, and movie theaters. Stop leaving your residence unless you absolutely must. And do all of this for the sole purpose of avoiding getting sick and getting others sick.

Now I completely understand why we were given this message. Under the circumstances it made sense. But that doesn't erase the sheer bizarreness of it.

We humans are hard-wired to want to live with purpose. Without a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives, we become untethered, and some very undesirable things begin to happen in us and in the communities we inhabit.

And purpose can't be something negative. We can't focus our energies exclusively on avoiding something bad and feel like our lives have meaning. We have to have a positive purpose, something good that we're pursuing.

So that gets us back to the big question: why Church? What is the good that we're pursuing by gathering together like this?

Here's where one of the letters we find in the New Testament offers a huge amount of help. We didn't read from it today, but I want to spend just a moment discussing it. It's the letter to the

Ephesians, the text on which the book that our Thursday-night study group is reading this Easter season focuses.

Ephesians is utterly unique among all of the letters that make up most of the New Testament. All of the others were written to churches or individual pastors in response to some sort of problem or crisis. But not Ephesians. This letter was written to an early church to explore at the deepest possible level what Church actually is, its immutable nature that exists even if its people fall way short in terms of living it out.

And it boils down to this: Church is the community that practices Resurrection right in the middle of the world of death. It's a colony of heaven in a country that falls well short of heaven. And this is true of Church no matter what, even if its people are doing a less-than-stellar job of actually being that colony of heaven.

We see this in today's Gospel. Today we heard that famous text in John where Jesus essentially reinstates Peter. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Then feed my sheep!

But it's really pretty counterintuitive that Jesus reinstates Peter at all. I mean what Peter did was a pretty epic failure of nerve, the kind that would cost most people their jobs permanently. Immediately after promising to follow his leader

even to death, he abandons and denies him. This is no small mistake.

But in this celebrated scene on the beach, Jesus and Peter practice Resurrection. The relationship and trust they had before has died. The sense of Peter's faithfulness and reliability had died. But in the midst of all of this death, the risen Lord, in both word and action, declares beyond the shadow of a doubt that life gets the final word.

I think this answers my big question. This is why we gather here each week. This is why there is such a thing as Church. We are the community that is charged and empowered by the Holy Spirit to practice Resurrection in this land where death so often appears to have the upper hand.

And while it might often seem insignificant and unglamorous, we're doing just that simply by coming together here, just as we're doing right now.

I have a confession to make. I'm a hot mess. I was a hot mess before this pandemic even started. I was impetuous and inconsistent, I would say things I didn't really mean and fail to follow through on promises. And throughout these last couple of years I've become an even hotter mess. To say that I mishandled some of the challenges the pandemic threw at me would be an understatement.

And I know I'm in good company here. I mean this with the utmost love and respect for all of you, but we're all a hot mess.

And yet here we are. You all are still gracious enough to listen to me preach, and you support me in so many ways as your Rector. I still love all of you, pray for you, and seek to give you the best I have to offer, inadequate as that may be.

That's what it looks like to be the community that practices Resurrection. That's how we enact in our own time the scene of Jesus, Peter, and the other apostles on the beach.

It's way too easy to get caught up in panicked questions about how to fix the church. How do we become what we need to be and market ourselves to a skeptical world?

But today let's forget all of that and instead focus on what we already are. We already are the community that the Holy Spirit has placed here at 678 Enos Way in Livermore, California, to practice Resurrection in the country of death. And we are that community no matter what. We have been that community since before any of us arrived, and while we each have a pivotal role to play, it ultimately does not depend on us. We are that community because that's what God has built in this place. Let's just let that sink in.