



*Grief & Loss; Vision & Hope*  
Easter 5A 5/10/20  
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment  
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*Oh Lord, may Your Word only be spoken; and Your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.*

If you have been to even a few funerals in an Episcopal Church, there is a high likelihood that you have heard the first six verses from the passage appointed from the Gospel of John for today. It is one of the more beautiful and comforting parts of the Bible. It is also one of the more disturbing and uncomfortable.

The passage comes from a long section of encouragement and teaching called the Farewell Discourses. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. He seeks to reassure them not only of his presence with them in the future, but also of their intimate connection with him and God in the present. They are having a hard time understanding what he is saying.

Nonetheless, these words of Jesus, remembered by the community that produced John's Gospel, indicate their confidence that they not only survive Jesus' death. More than that, these words reflect and embody his Risen Life in their midst as a community in a way that was impossible while he was still with them—much the same way a student doesn't really know how much she knows until she leaves the teacher's classroom.

Not only will Jesus prepare a place for them later in the Father's house, he will make a place for them now, a place for courage and healing. A place to belong—as individuals and as a community—in a harsh and unforgiving world.

In the course of this conversation of reassurance, we come to a statement that has made many a liberal Christian uncomfortable with its apparent exclusivity. Of course, I mean, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (v.6)

I confess that more than once, I have simply left off the second part of that sentence when I have used this passage in a funeral, for fear of giving offense. A funeral is not usually the time or place to risk offending anyone, if it can be helped.

It may be an evasion of what seems to be the plain sense of the text: Jesus is the only path to God. That might make sense in the context of the vicious, late first-century battle among factions in Judaism—ones which saw Jesus as the Messiah and ones which didn't. The Jesus-following factions produced the Gospel of John.

But as is always the case with rich and powerful texts from Scripture, interpreted with help from the Spirit through the ages, there are many layers of meaning. The Bible *is*, in fact, a Living Word.

I think what Jesus is saying—though perhaps not what John's community remembered—is that the way to spiritual maturity, the way into the Source and Sustainer of our being, the way that we

grow into the love and strength and power of God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father— is the Jesus Way of death and resurrection. The way of death and resurrection that Jesus taught and lived is the only way to life that is really life.

Father Richard Rohr, the Franciscan writer and teacher, writes about this pattern of death and resurrection in his daily email series this past March. In “Patterns that Are Always True,” Rohr writes that COVID-19 and the way it has upended our world are opportunities for modern people to discover/rediscover the patterns that are always true. The way to real, authentic life always goes through death of some kind. These patterns are both painful and live-giving. And we tend to avoid them at all costs. <https://cac.org/the-patterns-that-are-always-true-2020-03-29/>

Christianity has proclaimed this pattern in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, whom we call the Christ, the Anointed One. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12.24) This is how Jesus lived his life. According to Rohr, *all* the great religious traditions hold to some variation of the life-giving power of this pattern.

The presence of the pandemic has pushed churches into a refreshed understanding of this pattern. It is a kind of death, the reality of which we have tried to avoid. What the church is going through now, is dying to our image of what was once successful but is no longer. It’s not that we have stopped loving God and neighbor, but that the ways of doing that faithfully and effectively are undergoing a sea change. We’ve known this for quite a while actually, decades even, coinciding with the numerical decline of the church in North America. But COVID-19 has brought it to a head.

If we paid lip-service before to the idea that the Church is not a building but God’s people, if we haven’t learned this in the last few weeks, we’ll have the chance to continue to learn it for months, and likely years to come. It’s not that our buildings and material assets are not important—they are. They are critical launching pads for love of God and neighbor. But the way we re-imagine and re-organize ourselves to make use of our buildings and technology as God’s people will never matter more in our lifetimes.

Peter’s letter this morning hits that nail on the head. Living Stones. Isn’t that powerful image? Is that like a rock that moves around on its own? On feet? Does it have a beating heart? And skin?

It’s not clear precisely who was writing this letter. Tradition attributes it to the apostle Peter. Peter means “stone” or “rock” in Greek. It’s unlikely a fisherman of his ilk would have been literate enough to compose a letter like this on his own. Perhaps he had a scribe to give shape to his thoughts. Nonetheless, it has carried the weight of an eyewitness to Jesus’ ministry.

The writer addresses Christian communities of resident foreigners and household slaves living in the pagan environment of Asia Minor, aliens to its culture and customs. (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* p. 337) He writes sometime late in the first century to encourage them to keep the faith in a hostile or indifferent environment. He encourages them to be living stones, like the living stone of Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith.

I'm reminded of how we are living out this epistle during this pandemic. While our buildings lie dormant and receive some needed tender loving care, you, we, are the living stones which make up the Church of Christ.

It's you who are participating in worship right now on Facebook or Zoom or on the Website; it's you who will fellowship at Zoom Coffee hour in a few minutes; you who are studying Scripture together over Zoom; you are the ones who are making phone calls, sending emails, texts and letters to check up on one another; it's you who are saying your prayers on behalf of others; it's you who are making donations of time, talent, and treasure to the needy; you are the ones who are continuing to meet to conduct the gatherings necessary to sustain the ministries of the Church.

Some of you are working in the medical field in clinical settings and supporting infrastructure. Others are working in essential services in retail establishments and government offices; others are teaching our children. Still others are continuing in their circumstances, whatever they are, with grace and compassion.

You are the living stones in the spiritual house that is God's church, who are the hands and heart of Jesus in the world, who are both reaching in and reach out to minister in Christ's name.

But it's all changing, isn't it?

I was on a Zoom call with Bishop Gates, clergy, and lay leaders in the Diocese this past Thursday. Bishop Gates shared with us an article called "Leading beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization is now a Startup." <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>

While the authors are management consultants, their orientation is theological as well as managerial, and their word is for the Church as well as for businesses and non-profits who seek the common good. The authors propose that there are three ways to engage the era of COVID-19: as blizzard, winter, and the beginning of a little ice age. These economic and cultural realities are nested and interconnected. A blizzard is a blinding storm in which you hunker down and just get through with stop-gap measures; it will pass, though the damage could be significant. The onset of winter requires, and usually allows, more thorough-going preparations and responses, though those could vary depending on your geography. But the beginning of a mini-ice age requires a radical re-examination of fundamental assumptions.



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The authors hope (and pray) they are wrong, but their counsel is to plan for a mini-ice age of at least 12-18 months, even while we react to blizzard conditions, and prepare for winter. Not all of what they say made sense to me in the context of church life, but I think a few of their observations ring deeply true for the Body of Christ.

First: This is a time for grief and loss. While many of our core ministries are continuing, they are doing so in vastly different ways. We're worshipping together, but the fact that we can't sing together is heartbreaking. Though there are many of us who were raised on Morning Prayer, for others it isn't quite Church if they can't have the Eucharist. As cool as it is to see everyone's face in Zoom Coffee hour, isn't it better to be in the cheerful bright space of the Upper Parish Hall, sharing crackers and cheese and hearing the comforting babble of conversation?

Though Monday Lunch has managed to temporarily reimagine the way it brings a hot meal, safely, to our unhoused siblings at MANNA, it doesn't bring together people from around town to drop off various food ingredients in the Upper Parish; to chop, sort, spread, boil, mix, and bag together in our kitchen; to drive the food down, then serve it together in the Cathedral with our partners .

And funerals. How will we do a real funeral? How can we really grieve with the sick and the dying if we cannot be near them? How can we really comfort one another in worship if we cannot be together?

And Church School. If you have been on Zoom during the week for school, or otherwise screen-bound, does Zoom Church School have the same appeal as being with your friends in the Chapel or in the Jerusalem Room?

The informal comings and goings at the church during the week, the pastoral visits we can make in person, and so, so much more—we grieve these losses, losses to be grieved in the stages that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified years ago: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance.

But the authors go on to say that it is also a time for vision and hope. It is a time for the entrepreneurial types among us who are restless and energized by creating new things in the world to come to the fore.

I can speak about how a variety of voices and skills have come together, through trial and error as well as expertise, to bring you this broadcast right now. I hope you are receiving it clearly and without buffering!

We are in the process of reimagining how we will worship in a mini-ice age. How will we consistently bring excellent music, prayer, praise, preaching—excellent worship—to people in a way that invites broad participation, that safely connects them to God and one another—whether they



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are at home or here? In the fall, we will have a superb and versatile Virtual Pipe Organ; what are the tools and human skills that we will need to invite people to reliably enjoy our worship where ever they are?

How will we reimagine how we do Christian education for all ages, when screens may be exactly what we *don't* want to see on Sunday morning or weekday evenings?

Again, these are times for vision and hope.

Finally, the strange truth heart at the Christian faith, is that grief and loss, vision and hope, are *not* separate realities. In fact, “they go together in a singular way, because they are the story of the Cross and Resurrection. There is no greater grief than Calvary; there is no greater hope than Easter. Christian creativity begins with grief. We are burying and saying goodbye to so much these days. But we do not grieve without hope. If we grieve with Jesus, and allow others to grieve, we can hope to be visited by the Comforter, the Spirit who breathed over creation before it was even formed.” (p. 17) <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>

We began with a funeral text in which Jesus prepares his followers for his death. We end with vision and hope, by which Jesus takes our griefs and turns them into joy. And he promises his followers in the Gospel this morning as they prepare to grieve his departure, that they will do *even greater* works than his. (verse 12)

And here we are, getting ready to do just that.

**Amen.**