

“Faith Will Bring Us Home”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
V Easter – 18 May 2014  
I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

In the summer of '94, on my way from Kentucky to start seminary in Alexandria, I took a detour to Indianapolis, which was hosting The General Convention of The Episcopal Church, an event that occurs only once every three years. I wanted to experience firsthand how our multinational Church governs itself. The experience was fascinating, intense, and sometimes confusing and intimidating. Between the House of Deputies, made up of clergy and laity, and the House of Bishops, approximately 1,000 people are eligible to vote, making The General Convention the world's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest regular elected democratic assembly, right after Iceland's parliament, the Althing.

Of course, having just finished college and on my way to another three years of school, I didn't have much money, so I avoided the convention hotels downtown and took a reasonably priced room near the racetrack where they run the Indy 500. One night, after a long day of plenary sessions, committee hearings, and the like, I got back to my room about 11pm, and just as I was almost asleep around midnight, someone started knocking on my door.

Now when I arrived at the motel that night, there was a group of people in the parking lot having a pretty good time, so I figured that somebody had gotten drunk and couldn't find their room. Still half-asleep, I reached for the door handle, but before I opened it, I remembered to check the little peephole to see who was on the other side. That decision may have saved my life, because waiting outside my door were two men holding pistols.

I quietly backed away from the door, picked up the phone, and called the person working the front desk, who helpfully suggested that I keep my door closed and locked. Duh! Later I

learned that those two young men had robbed a convenience store across the street and were looking for a place to hide. It was a sleepless night, full of dark imaginings of being a hostage or even a witness who had seen too much to live.

Never in my life had I felt more alone, afraid, and powerless. Unfortunately, this was not my first nor would it be my last time to feel that dreadful combination. I think all of us occasionally feel afraid, lonely, and powerless. For most of us, those sensations eventually subside, but in the midst of a big, fast, sometimes cruel world, we have ample opportunity to feel as if we are insignificant, buffeted around by forces that defy our comprehension, much less our control. Life can be a frustrating, disorienting, threatening experience, but it doesn't have to be, because with faith, we can overcome.

Consider the words of Peter. "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house . . . to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God." We may not enjoy being compared to stone any more than we liked being described as sheep by Jesus in last week's Gospel reading. We're all familiar with the putdown "dumb as a rock." Yet likening us to stone came naturally to a man who had his name changed by Jesus from Simon to Peter, which comes from the Greek word for rock. Stone brings to mind solidity. Water and wind, those powerful and patient forces, gradually wear stone down, but that process takes a very long time – longer than a lifetime.

And Peter calls us to be living stones, bound together as a spiritual house, laid down by the master mason that creates everything. As a stone connected to others by the mortar of Holy Spirit, we need never feel alone, nor should we feel powerless, because that mighty master mason has fashioned us for a higher purpose, to serve as a dwelling place for God, a structure not

made by human hands, but crafted by our living Lord, who does not neglect his handiwork, but tenderly cares for us.

When you feel isolated and alone, remember that you are not a single stone, but one among many who have been empowered to carry out a precious mission. Again, the words of Peter: “You are . . . God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Peter is mixing his metaphors here, but what a wonderful mixture. We tend to think of a stone house as an immovable object, but when God builds the house with living stones, with us, we can be solid and strong and agile and responsive, ready to move forward and share with others the good news that no one need settle for a life of full of fear, loneliness, and powerlessness.

In fact, our faith makes us more powerful than we could possibly imagine; perhaps more powerful than we would like to be. In the Gospel of John, there is a four-chapter section called the Farewell Discourse, where Jesus prepared his disciples for what was to come, his crucifixion and resurrection and ascension. To encourage them, and us, Jesus said, “The one who believes in me will . . . do greater works than these. If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it.”

Every time I read that passage, it takes my breath away. “If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it.” Think of the implications. Jesus fully believes that his followers, including us, can somehow outdo the wonders he wrought. Now this passage has often been misinterpreted to mean that if you ask for something to happen, and say “in the name of Jesus,” it will always come to pass. This misunderstanding of what Jesus said has led some people to despair and lose their faith, because it feels like Jesus isn’t listening. It can also cause someone to feel defective, as if their prayer went unanswered because their faith was insufficient. Some churches actually teach such rubbish, but nothing could be further from the truth.

To ask for something in the name of Jesus means much more than simply uttering his name. To ask in the name of Jesus means that we ask for what accords with his will. Remember the prayer Jesus taught his original disciples, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The will of God, in all of its glorious immensity, is a mystery beyond human comprehension. However, the witness of scripture reveals enough about God’s will that we can work toward conforming our hearts and minds, not to this world, but to the will of Him who gave us life and who gives us grace for daily life and ministry. It is a process of discernment that requires humble patience and fierce persistence, and we need not travel along the way alone, but in company with others, who together can perceive God’s purpose and strive to make that holy purpose a reality.

Imagine, if you dare, a world of peace and justice and mercy, where violence and selfishness no longer rule, and the abundance of the Earth provides for the needs of all. Imagine, if you dare, respectful public discourse that serves the common good instead of hateful words igniting fear that benefits an entrenched elite and their interests. Imagine, if you dare, a life not dominated by popular fads and fashion, by vacuous entertainments, but a life in which both our greatest passions and our highest priority are given over to what really matters.

At first glance, these imaginings may seem idle and ridiculous, but then we recall the words of Jesus and Peter. Each of us is a stone that need not stand alone, made noble by Jesus with a power that cannot be taken from us, only surrendered. Fear will stalk us. There will be days when we feel isolated and untouchable, drained of all power. But faith will bring us home, where we belong. Faith will bring us home, every single time. Amen.