

Fifth Sunday of Easter A - *"I go to prepare a place for you. ... I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."*

May 7, 2023.

It sounds so wonderful. It sounds perhaps like what we imagine heaven to be. If that's so, then it's a future place, a place that we will "go to." That may be part of the promise Jesus was making to his disciples. The other part is in his answer to Thomas: **"I am the way, the truth and the life."** Yes, we are promised eternal life, but we are also promised that we are already housed by God, fed by God, carried by God. We already have a foot in that place Jesus prepared for us if we but look around, look within and listen. But as nice as that sounds, doesn't it often seem difficult to imagine that in this world, we should be seeing evidence of Jesus being the way, the truth and the life? If people truly believed that God is very much with us, wouldn't "the world" be a different place?

Jesus often talked about the Kingdom of heaven being here already – it's here and now – and that we must be in the process of building it. But we aren't terribly far away from the kinds of things that happened when our church was still in its formative era. This Sunday's first reading from Acts (6:1-7) shoves a dangerous and dark shadow into our Easter joy. Stephen, even though he was filled with the Holy Spirit and evidently giving witness to what a life lived in imitation of Jesus should look like, is stoned to death by an angry crowd. Isn't that a frightening image? A manic crowd, hostile to goodness. Why? They couldn't imagine that God would become manifest in Jesus, live among human beings, die on the cross and rise. We might think to ourselves, "How sad. They had Jesus right in their midst and they missed him. We certainly wouldn't have!" Yet, look at what happens today. Groups of lay people, priests and sisters are brutally murdered by guerrilla groups with machine guns or machetes because they are working for freedom or education or they belong to the wrong tribe. Where is this Kingdom of heaven? For that matter, where is Jesus? Has he gone to prepare a heavenly place for us and forgotten to come back? Do our hearts become troubled? Yes, we wonder how we can build our faith to the point where we can believe in a different world – where we can see God in the midst of hardship.

Jesus never promised a safe and trouble-free life for those who followed him – far from it. He was always very honest about the fact that "the world" would most often cover its ears and shout, and sometimes throw stones. But if we try – if we believe that we are chosen, that there is truth in the saying that one candle brings light into the darkness – then we are building, piece by piece. We are adding stone upon stone, and we will feel the difference in ourselves. We need to be careful, however, not to think we have to complete the building of the Kingdom either all by ourselves, or at least in our lifetime. Our human desire to be successful, complete, wholly satisfied, can be a stumbling block for us just as rejecting Jesus was a stumbling block according to Peter. The Kingdom here will never be finished, it just continues to grow. We are a part, a critical and unique part, but not the whole. There is always more to learn and more to offer of ourselves to others. Evil will never cease trying to destroy the goodness of a holy place. And so the need to continue building ourselves up, but also to work together, pray together, become that holy nation, a holy community, right here with those sitting with and around us. Each and every one of us is called. Each and every one of us is invited to follow Jesus who is our way, our truth and our life. The Good News is that Jesus is with us. He has promised never to leave us. We are holy. We are chosen. We are God's beloved. And, no matter who we are there is a place waiting for us in the kingdom.

Way back in 1975 a fellow named Gary Dahl lost his job at an advertising agency in San Francisco. His bills began to mount up, and he couldn't find any work. But he was a fellow who could think outside the box. Dahl came up with an absurd way to make a lot of money fast. He invented the Pet Rock. It was such a crazy idea that it took the country by storm. Of course, the pet rocks were not just plain old rocks. Most of them were round smooth river rocks. But that wasn't the thing that made them popular. The key was in the packaging. The Pet Rock came in a box resembling the boxes people used to get when they bought gerbils or turtles at the local pet store. It even had air holes for the rock to breathe through, and bits of wood shaving to keep it comfortable. Inside the packaging was an instruction

pamphlet which gave “feeding” and other instructions to make sure the Pet Rock was well cared for. The booklet even gave a lineage for each rock, much like a fancy purebred dog. Of course, many of the rocks, unsurprisingly, had been part of the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China, etc. The pamphlet even taught people how to teach their Pet Rock to obey commands – the best ones were: “stay” “lay down” “sit” and if you wanted to get really fancy... “play dead.” It was an absurd fad, because everyone knows that rocks don’t do anything. They are just there, wherever they might be.

Now, in this Sunday’s second reading from 1 Peter (2:4-9), Peter talks about rocks. He first says that Jesus is a stone, a rock, but not an inanimate mineral. He says that Jesus is a living rock. How can a rock be alive? That must have seemed absurd to the people who first heard or read this. Peter makes an even seemingly crazier assertion: not only is Jesus a living stone, but his followers are also called to be living stones. What does Peter mean by this? Or, more properly, what is the Holy Spirit saying through Peter? When Peter called Jesus the living stone, he particularly referred to the cornerstone of the building, the stone that unites all the other stones. We are called to be living stones, not inanimate pet rocks, but stones that unite all other stones together to form the Building of the Lord, the Church. We are not just pet rocks. Nor are we any old rocks laying on the ground. We are living stones. We have Dignity. We have received dignity from the Lord. We have been chosen by God. We are the building that is the church. Christ is the cornerstone (cf. Is 28:16) that is the foundation of the spiritual edifice of the Christian community (1 Pt 2:5). To unbelievers, Christ is an obstacle and a stumbling block on which they are destined to fall (1 Pt 2:8).

Read Peter’s letter in the second reading again. Do you believe that we can drink that pure, spiritual milk that God offers us. That’s where we can begin again, regardless of how old we’ve become in the church. We are offered that nourishment in many ways – through prayer, through the words and symbols of our liturgies, through the example of those who love us into loving ourselves because they believe in God’s love for us. Perhaps the most powerful way of growing in the spirit is through sharing the Eucharist and believing that Jesus left this with us so we could touch him and know he is in us. There is the power. There is the mystery that explodes within us if we just open our hearts and minds to all God reveals to us. There is the well of power that helps us continue looking for ways to build that Kingdom of heaven here while we wait to take our place in the world to come. Peter reminds us that we are chosen, we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God. Do you believe that? Do you really? If not, how can we help you to begin to grasp the meaning of those words? When people do begin to believe these words, they find themselves doing amazing things. We might first think of those people like Stephen who give their lives for what they believe. But then we must also think of ourselves who may be called to build the kingdom in different ways, through teaching, writing, through the example of our integrity, and genuineness. When we truly believe in the promise of Christ, when we find the space and time each day to experience the presence of God in prayer, when we can look with understanding at the past and with hope and confidence to the future, then we will begin to know the peace and joy he meant us to have when he said, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.’ Indeed, Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare the many dwelling places for us in the Father’s house.