



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

To Make The Dream Come True

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Russell
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It is a critical moment in the story. After many miles and much healing, preaching and teaching, in this -- the 8th chapter of the Gospel According to Mark -- Jesus finally “pops the question” to Peter. “Who do you say that I am?” he asks. And I imagine the Angels and Archangels (and all the company of heaven) pausing for just a moment in that hymn they forever sing – pausing to listen for the answer Peter would give. Does he “get it” yet? And then the answer, “*You are the Messiah.*”

The Angels and Archangels breathe a sigh of relief and get back to choir practice. He gets it! Alleluia, Alleluia!

Peter and the Gospel story have turned an important corner – have taken a no-turning-back step forward. This radical rabbi from Nazareth is not just some teacher ... he is THE teacher. The Messiah. The One who will show the people God created in love how to walk in love with God and with each other. Peter gets it. Peter believes.

The story turns a corner ...but it doesn't slow down. If anything, it *accelerates* out of the corner as Jesus begins by explaining where this journey he is on is leading – and the same Peter who just “got it” reacts by rebuking the one he was just proclaimed Messiah. And so Jesus sits them ALL down and – Mark tells us -- to teach: working to help Peter – and us -- understand what this discipleship thing is all about. It is a process that brings to my mind Biblical scholar Verna Dozier who famously said, “*Don't tell me what you believe – tell me what difference it makes that you believe.*” Just so, Jesus is saying to Peter “Now that you've told me **what** you believe, let me tell you how to make a *difference* because you believe.”

And so he says to those who would be his disciples that they should “*take up their cross and follow me.*”

Peter still doesn't seem to really “get it” – which, as we know, is going to turn out to be a pattern with Peter. And the more I have thought about it -- as I've mulled these texts in preparation for this morning's sermon -- the more I've become convinced that one of the reasons that kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven hasn't **come** yet is that the church has as much trouble “getting” what Jesus was saying as Peter did.

Jesus didn't say take up MY cross and get yourself nailed to it. He said take up YOUR cross and (this would be the punch-line) FOLLOW me. Follow me. Not "stay here in 'the crucified place' – but follow me to the resurrection place. Follow me to the place of hope and promise and new beginnings and the power of a love that triumphs even over the absolute worst that the world can do. Even over death. Death on a cross.

As resurrection people, the cross is not a destination but a call to action. Frederick Buechner offered a wonderful image when he famously said, "*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*"

Another image that speaks to me is one of the cross as an icon of where the love of God that pours down upon us and comes up under us intersects with the love we extend out into the world when we reach out to others in love in response to the abundance we have been received.

Take up your cross and follow me, Jesus says. Take up YOUR cross. Find YOUR place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger. Those are our marching orders as Christians – marching orders as ancient as our 1st century brother Peter and current as our 21st century world's deep hunger for peace, justice, equality & compassion.

For this is the "mystery of faith" we proclaim: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. **All three. Every time.** The real mystery to me this morning isn't the mystery of faith. It's the mystery of the folks who are ready to settle for the first third of that confession of faith as the "whole enchilada" of the faith once received from the apostles.

For the record: **It is not.** If we settle for that it's like settling for Good Friday and not holding out for Easter. Because at the end of the day, the Good News of God in Christ Jesus we've been called – like Peter – to proclaim is not about a cross but about an empty tomb. It's not about how Jesus died, it's about how he calls us to live free from the fear of death by the power of the resurrection.

And it is about how in the resurrection that cross – an instrument of torture and death – is re-signified as a symbol of hope – of the power of life over death – of the dream that will never die. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

When we take up OUR cross and follow Jesus as people of the resurrection we take up not an instrument of death but a symbol of hope. And it is that hope that we take out into the world every time we leave this place – fed by the holy food and drink of new and unending life we call strength for the journey. The presentation hymn we will sing together in a few minutes puts it like this:

*A world in need now summons us to labor, love, and give;
to make our life an offering to God that all may live;
the Church of Christ is calling us to make the dream come true:
a world redeemed by Christlike love;
all life in Christ made new.*

To make the dream come true is to partner with God in the high calling of working for a world redeemed – for ALL: not just some. THAT’S the dream of God – the one Verna Dozier wrote about in her seminal book published in 1991 and entitled ... (wait for it ...) ... The Dream of God: *“God has paid us the high compliment of calling us to be coworkers with our Creator, a compliment so awesome that we have fled from it and taken refuge in the church. The urgent task for us is to reclaim our identity as the people of God and live into our high calling as the baptized community...that the dream of God for a new creation may be realized.*

I first encountered The Dream of God when a copy leapt off the shelf of the old Diocesan Center bookstore and into my hands. As I was preparing for ordination her words were my constant companions as the book became part of my seminary-survival-kit – reminding me over and over and **over** again not to confuse God with the church – challenging me to balance academics and action. Her foundational thesis – that the church has failed in its high calling to be the Body of Christ in the world because it has **too often settled for worshipping Jesus instead of following Jesus** -- became a core value of my own priesthood -- and I am deeply grateful to be part of this All Saints Church community that not only shares but lives out those values.

Finally, her words about faith and fear are ones I have turned to again and again and frequently preached -- especially whenever it’s time to once more step out into new beginnings, new challenges, new opportunities. *“Doubt”* said Verna, *“is not the opposite of faith: fear is. Fear will not risk that even if I am wrong, I will trust that if I move today by the light that is given me, knowing it is only finite and partial, I will know more and different things tomorrow than I know today, and I can be open to the new possibility I cannot even imagine today.”*

Freedom from the fear of risking because we might be wrong frees us to get it right by opening new doors, challenging old assumptions, chancing new undertakings. And let’s face it – there is an urgent need for new possibilities we cannot even imagine today to overcome the very real challenges facing the world we live in today if we’re going to “make that dream come true.”

I missed hearing President Obama on Wednesday when he addressed the joint session of congress on health care because I was on a plane to St. Louis. But late that night I caught a replay on CNN – and there in my hotel room I got what Ed Bacon calls chill-bumps when I heard him tell congress – and us – **“We did not come here to fear the future, we came here to shape it.”** Amen. Alleluia. Alleluia.

We have our work cut out for us – no doubt about that – if we’re going to shape the future in alignment with God’s dream of world where love, peace, justice and compassion are realities for all – not just some – of God’s beloved human family.

But that, my brothers and sisters, IS our call. That IS our challenge. That IS the cross we have been charged to take up – the work we have been given to do. And as we get on with

that work, here are just a few of the things that are on the “to do” list to make that dream come true:

Comprehensive health care reform that assures high-quality, affordable health care for ALL Americans.

Family values that value ALL families and leave no one outside the liberty and justice our founding fathers decreed was the inalienable right of all – not some – human beings.

Just immigration reform that embraces our proud heritage as a nation of immigrants and reclaims the core value of all our traditions of welcoming the stranger.

And that’s just for starters. The world is full of deep hungers that we DO have the capacity to meet – and that is the work we have the **privilege** to be called to do, my brothers and sisters -- each in our own different, unique, and fabulous ways.

One of the ways we live out those values here at All Saints Church is to encourage each and every member – and each and every person considering membership – to explore in a very intentional way where their story connects with the church’s story – and where both connect with God’s story in our Exploring Membership classes.

A new series of those classes are starting soon – October 4 to be exact – and I hope you will consider joining us for this 8-week journey -- (there’s a table on the lawn to sign up today!) – to connect, reflect and explore where your deep joy meets the world’s deep hunger.

Finally this morning, let us rejoice that we have been called to partner with God in making God’s dream come true. Let us celebrate together that we **are** called to take up our crosses – our challenges and our opportunities – as we follow Jesus in meeting those needs. And let us proclaim a mystery of faith that offers the sure and certain promise of life abundant that transcends even the fear of death.

For it is in being freed from that fear that we ARE liberated to embrace the abundant life that God has made known to us in Jesus – liberates us to not fear the future but to shape it – and to see to it that the dream will never die ... because we won’t let it! Thanks be to God. Alleluia.

Amen.