

HOW THEN MUST WE LIVE?

“New York, New York, it’s a helluva town. The Bronx is up, and the battery’s down. The people ride in a hole in the ground. New York, New York....”I grew up near New York City. The city has never frightened me. Rather, it has fascinated me, reenergized me, recharged me, When I was little, my mom took me to the movies, to the rodeo, to the circus, to a restaurant called Toffenetti’s, to the zoo, to Radio City Music Hall. When I was little, my Uncle Bob took me to the Polo Grounds—yes I am THAT old--to see Willie Mays and the New York Giants and to Yankee stadium to see the other Giants—the ones who played the Colts. When I got older I often went by myself or with friends. I took busses and subways and I walked, walked, walked. I would walk up 42nd Street and wait in line for half price tickets in Times Square. I developed a lifelong passion for Broadway, for dance in your seat musicals and stunning drama. I would stroll up Fifth Avenue, light candles in St. Patrick’s cathedral, press my nose up against the breathtaking windows of Bergdorf Goodman’s, and be whoever I wanted to be. My friends and I stormed NY after the Senior Prom and thought we were the most gorgeous, sophisticated people who ever danced in Times Square. Eventually, I left midtown and ventured south to Washington Square where college kids read poems in the park and to Greenwich Village where sixties folk singers stirred souls with Blowin’ in the Wind. I went to Wall Street and to the New York Stock Exchange. I saw the skyline from the Circle Line tour boat and from the Staten Island ferry. I went north to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick museum and was lost for words when I tried to explain the beauty and knowledge that I

had discovered. I would reflect for hours about the city's history. I would imagine Henry Hudson as he saw the magnificent palisades for the first time. I would wonder about the millions who came and passed through Ellis Island, all of those frightened and hope-filled souls who came carrying so little and dreaming so much. I would think about Edith Wharton's dazzling *Age of Innocence* and the jammin' creativity of Harlem in the twenties. I would almost weep at the miracles that are the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State. Although I long ago switched my allegiance to Baltimore, I do love New York. It taught me so much, inspired me so much. It gave me a place to discover the world and, in so doing, to discover myself. It gave me my accent and my edge. And it gave me the belief that: "If I could make it there...."

And so it was with great trepidation that, on an April weekend in 2002, I returned to New York for the first time since 9/11. It was with a sense of sadness that I slid into a cab outside of Penn Station and began the long drive down the Westside Highway. For I knew that I could put it off no longer. I had to gaze into the abyss where the World Trade Centers use to be. I had to breathe the air that had absorbed the anguish. I had to join the procession of mourners who had gone before me, and link spiritual arms with those who would come after me. I knew that once I made this trip that the New York City of my childhood, the New York City of my memories, would never be the same. But what I did not know was just how profoundly one day on the perimeter of Ground Zero would affect not just my memories of New York, but also my faith and my life. Because what had been a mental and emotional experience for me became a soul experience, what had been words and photographs and downloaded email pictures and NPR news analyses found its way into the core of my being. I

thought I “got” 9/11. I thought I had processed it, had mourned, had moved on. But I had not. Because coming just days after I had mourned Good Friday and celebrated Easter, I was about to get one of the most profound spiritual gifts of my life. I was about to see the ashes from the burnt crosses and inhale the agony. But I was also about to experience the Resurrection. It just didn’t look quite like I expected.

The occasion of my visit was the Trinity Institute’s 33rd annual conference. The topic was: How Then Must We Live? After living through September 11th, how then must we live? Held in NY’s historic Trinity Church, it offered talks by some of the finest thinkers and writers on Christian spirituality in the country. And they were as good as I hoped they would be. But I am not going to talk to you about them today. Rather, I want to tell you about what I saw. I need to tell you about what I saw. I could no more keep it to myself than those crazy ladies running from the tomb and mouthing off to the skeptical disciples could keep that experience to themselves. “You’re not gonna believe what we just saw.” Here is what I saw.

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral is magnificent. It is located on the corner of Broadway and Wall Street. How is that for an address? It is all arches and vaults and stained glass and carvings and beauty. It is surrounded by a graveyard where many famous Americans, including Alexander Hamilton, are buried. When you walk out of the front door and go three blocks north you are walking past the abyss. There is a fence there on that April day. And that fence is covered, absolutely covered, with pictures, with flowers, with wreaths, with notes, with an outpouring of love and grief so gorgeous and graphic that it engulfs you. Hundreds gather there and read, and reflect, and photograph, and pray, and weep. You keep

walking and you come to Old Saint Paul's. Saint Paul's Chapel is the oldest public building in continuous use in Manhattan. Completed in 1766, and modeled after St. Martins-by-the-Fields, London, St. Paul's is a prime example of Georgian Classic architecture. You know—like those beautiful churches in the center of a pristine New England town. George Washington, of course, worshiped there. The site of many historic events, it is an exquisite, colonial church; at least it was. But after September 11th...Just hold that thought. Hold the thought of what St. Paul's looked like on September 10th. Flashback. The crucifixion. Flashback. 9/11.

My whole life I had read these words. "They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him." (Matthew 27:28-31, NRSV) I had read the crucifixion story. I had heard it. But did I "get it"; can anyone "get it?" Similarly, since 9/11, I have "relived" that crucifixion. I have seen it on TV, on pictures on my computer, in the newspaper, in my nightmares. But to be at Trinity and Old Saint Paul's, and to hear the people who live and work there, is like talking to Mary and Joseph of Arimathea and John. One priest said: "Pretend you have a brown paper bag, and into that paper bag you put a hurricane, and a typhoon, and an earthquake. Then you open it. And all of those things come out. All at once. That is what it was like. All of us at the conference sat and listened to the stories of horror beyond the telling. And the words echoed, echoed: "That is what it was like."

Now, back to Old Saint Paul's. If Ground Zero is the crucifixion, what I experienced in Old Saint Paul's was the Resurrection. I cannot tell it to you anymore simply than this. In its purest form, I experienced the Resurrection. Let me try to describe what I saw. The walls of this beautiful, holy space, every inch of the walls, are covered with posters, and flags, and cards, and drawings in crayons and ink and finger paints. There is not an inch of wall or balcony not covered by a kaleidoscope of color. The art comes from all over the country, all over the world, a dazzling outpouring. When you sit in the pews every hymnal, every prayer book, is covered with notes. Notes scrawled from children in Seattle. Letters printed by teens in Tallahassee. Along the side wall, tables are filled with eyewash, band aids, lip balm, lotions, bottled water. Along the back wall, tables are filled with hot food, sandwiches, donuts, steaming coffee. Cots fill every available space upstairs and down, and strangers sleep next to one another in peace and safety. As you enter, no one asks if you are black or white, gay or straight, woman or man, Jewish or Baptist. There are no creeds required. A violinist plays soulfully and serenely as five policewomen and men rest in the historic pews and sip sip coffee. A burly rescue worker sprawls on a cot next to George Washington's box. Soda machines brim with donated cokes and designer water. Bags and bags of dirty linens await pick-up. There are volunteers everywhere, smiling, low key, familiar. Some people just pray. A volunteer walks up to me and tells me that I must consciously put some love back into the space, that I must renew it with my spirit. Others, like me, understand, perhaps for the first time, the words: "this is the body of Christ." I just stand there—I do not know for how long because I have no sense of time—and feel the presence of Almighty God. In a sanctuary next to the abyss, I watch women and

men act out the words: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?” (Matthew 25:37-38 NRSV) I see people doing God’s work. I see what it means to be instruments of peace. I see people being and doing church.

But no matter how many facts I give to you, no matter how skilled I am at painting this picture, I still do not do justice to the way it feels to be there. I do not mean feel in the way a particular sensation feels, like cold water splashing on your face, or hot coffee on your tongue. I mean how it feels viscerally, totally, completely. I mean that my whole being is surrounded by an understanding of what it means to rise from the ashes, of what it means to not let horror and hatred defeat you, of what it means to be in a place where no one has to hide who they are, to be in a place where demons are faced down not denied, of what it means to live through Friday and Saturday and wake up Sunday morning, of what it means to simply provide a sacred space for people to tend to their bodies, and hearts, and souls, of what it means to meet human need in the way Jesus told us to meet human need.

The Resurrection robs the crucifixion of its power to intimidate, to terrorize, to control. And the loving going on at Old Saint Paul does the same. The Resurrection of the human spirit in an actively loving faith community does the same thing: it robs terror of its power over us. God and Jesus were present in the Resurrection and are present in us through the Resurrection. The world doesn’t need talk about the Resurrection. The world doesn’t need bumper stickers about the Resurrection. The world doesn’t need a contemporary Pharisee telling someone else: say this about

the Resurrection and say it exactly this way. The world needs more Resurrection action! When people experience the love of God, they know it.

This is what I realize. The chasm in the ground where the World Trade Center used to be carves a hole in your being deeper than any you have experienced, any that you could imagine. It represents all that hate can do. It is devastation and agony and grief and terror of apocalyptic proportions, and it leaves you almost unable to draw a breath for the imagining of it. The sum total of the suffering that was endured, that is endured, in that place is more than your soul can bear. But I also realize that it is not the only holocaust, not the only time in history when hate has nailed innocent men and women to crosses not of their own making. Every time an innocent slave was lynched, every time a sleeping woman or man is dragged from a bed in El Salvador or Baghdad, every time a Jew was hurled into a box car for that unbearable journey, anytime hate and fear and greed and indifference abduct the human heart, nails are hammered into the cross.

But I also realize this: that if the hole carved in me is deeper, so is the space within me that holds and nurtures compassion. How then do we live after 9/11? We live, I believe, with our eyes and hearts focused not on retribution but on resurrection. To focus on retribution is to kneel before the darkness—all the fear and greed and malice and evil—that hammered Jesus to the cross. To succumb to retribution is to perpetuate the cycle of hate and death that causes children blow themselves to kingdom come. To focus on retribution is to give in and give up all that our faith has taught us; it is to celebrate the forces of chaos and worship the gods of destruction. But that is not what we are called to do. We are called to live the

resurrection. After the mourning, and there must be mourning, after the shock and inertia, after the disbelief, and agony and hate, we are called to live the resurrection. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! But it does not end there. Christ also seeks to rise in us daily.

In Baltimore, no one flew a plane into our World Trade Center, but there is a deep abyss. It is an abyss dug out one shovel at a time. Every time an addict shoots up; every time a sixteen year old lies bleeding to death of gunshot wounds in an East Baltimore alley; every time a wife is brutally beaten; every time a child is lost to these mean streets; every time the food runs out before the hunger; every time one more house is boarded up; every time a sick, old person dies alone: every time this happens we dig our hole. Believe me, dear friends, there are rescue workers in the city of Baltimore. Do you think that the homicide detectives and parents and social workers and teachers and firemen and doctors and grandmothers and priests who deal with this on a daily basis are immune to the pain and agony? Of course not! No more than we are immune from hurting for our city. And how shall we now live? And how shall we now live?

The lesson I learned at Old Saint Paul's and Ground Zero is this. That the resurrected church is in constant and heartfelt prayer—the kind of prayer you offer only when you experience tragedy so complete that you have no choice but to finally surrender to the grace and comfort and strength of Almighty God. The resurrected church is people who thoughtfully discover the needs of brothers and sisters around the corner and around the world and then move quietly and assuredly and lovingly to meet those needs without any concern for creed or color or sexual orientation or age or gender or education or zip code. The resurrected church in the purest form is a sacred space that does not need to impose

doctrine but welcomes and embraces and affirms the soul. It is a place that nourishes and empowers its own members for love and service to others. It is a place that creates what Parker Palmer calls pockets of possibilities and circles of trust where people can become what God intends them to be. It is a church willing to let go of its desire to recreate some 1955 Dick/Jane/Sally/Spot/Puff image and to embrace the possibility of now. The resurrected church creates music, perks coffee, washes dirty linen and rescues not only those who need to be rescued but also the rescuers. It is a place where people know they are loved.

Everyone sitting here this morning needs to be part of that kind of church. Baltimore needs us to be that kind of church. But most of all, I believe to embrace the Gospel is to embrace the truth that that is the kind of church Jesus calls us to be—a church that affirms, accepts, empowers, rescues and loves. This, then, is how we shall live. This, then, is the Resurrection. And in Baltimore, as in New York, in many ways it is just beginning.

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. As preached at University Baptist Church, August 19th, 2012