

“No Going Back”

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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, KY

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It has been almost nine weeks since we last gathered in person to worship together in this space. It has been over two months since our classes and discussion groups last met in person, since our last shared breakfast, since the last time Father Michael and I placed the body of Christ in your hands. And these weeks have been long, and anxious, and arduous. At the same time, it feels like only last week that I saw your smiling faces as you headed out the door to lunch, none of us suspecting it would be the last time for a while.

We are beginning to reach a turning point, as a state and a nation, as some officials begin to call for the reopening of doors and the reconvening of progressively larger group gatherings. You may know someone who has made the transition back to going into an office after working remotely, or you may be putting together a plan for how to go about reopening your own business. Elected officials and public health agencies are establishing new guidelines and publishing thresholds of capacity for social distancing and sanitation. As a society we are starting to imagine an endpoint, a moment when we go back. Go back to school, to work, back to normal. I’ll admit that I think and pray daily about being back in this place with you all, knowing that place really does matter, that these stones are more than just a shelter from rain for the instruments of liturgy. This building, these pews, this altar. They aren’t just props and a set. They are our home, our place of rest and renewal. We may come from many different neighborhoods, different economic backgrounds, different educations and even different hometowns, but this

place is our shared touchstone, the place that pulls us from our points on the compass to our center in the cross. When we imagine going back to normal, that includes going back to church. I know that I am not alone in dreaming of a bright red door swinging wide open.

This is not the first time we as the church have dreamed of going back. Each generation dreams of going back to the days of the generation before, when pews were fuller and acolytes were more numerous, when each grade level had its own Sunday school teacher and we knew the name of everyone in the parish directory. We dream of going back to a time when distractions were fewer and scheduling conflicts on Sunday morning were almost non-existent. I think we all dream now of going back to a time when we had never heard of COVID-19, and when most of us had never known an Easter without the smell of white lilies and the sound of boisterous alleluia choruses. As a priest I feel the temptation of envying the apostles in the reading from Acts today, as the Lord added more and more to their number with each passing day, and all who believed were together and held all things in common. What we wouldn't give, as a church, to go back to that evangelical awakening.

The painful and controversial truth is, we aren't going back. Businesses and public places may begin to open their doors to the public in waves, but there will be low occupancy limits, and temperature checks at the door. We may start venturing out more in coming weeks, beyond our once-weekly grocery trips and our outdoor exercises. But the vast majority of us will be wearing masks, and standing far apart from one another even as we reunite and express how much we've missed one another. Our worship will look different, so much so that those conversations are being had almost daily on every single level of the church and across denominations. No, we aren't going back, either to the idyllic time of the early church or the "normal" church we remember from two months ago. Like Mary on that holiest of days, we cannot go back toward

the tomb. We have been commissioned, we have been sent, not to go back, but to move forward, step by faithful step. We as Christians, we as the people of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, will go forward into a resurrected community, a way of being baptized members of a body that is altogether new and different and at the same time sacred and familiar. Because that is who we are, who we have always been, and who we must become if we are to be faithful to the promises of God.

Like the disciples on the Emmaus road, we mourn what we have lost and what may ultimately be left behind. And like Jesus, our hope will be revealed to one another in the breaking of bread, even if we do not recognize it at first. The risen Christ looked different when he greeted his loved ones on the third day. He looked so different that they did not know him, not at first. But he was also the same Lord, the same man who had been pierced with nails. Not dead, but changed. And so will we be, when our red doors are opened again. We will have to do things differently, we will have to stretch and bend and live into the discomfort of it all for the sake of our love for one another. Because that love is what is driving us, that is what pushes us forward while we long to go back. Christ loved us and gave himself for us so that we could love one another in the same self-sacrificial way. This is what bursts forth from the background of the Acts of the Apostles today, the undercurrent behind an idyllic church where all who believe are together and hold one another up in prayer, study, and the breaking of bread. Love. The love of brothers and sisters who have died and been reborn in the waters of baptism and embraced one another fully in the name of Christ. Their number grew every day because they were propelled forward, into one another's hearts and homes and lives, the makeup and outline of the community morphing and changing every moment.

Like our community in this time of change, our mothers and fathers in faith witnessed drastic shifts in their lives and in their world daily, while still developing and nurturing their common faith practices, educating new believers, and discerning God's will. In order to break bread together as a rapidly growing community, there was a lot of labor, a lot of cooking and cleaning and passing of plates. In order to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship there was much coordinating and translating and interpreting. Even their prayer had to be taught and learned and translated into new languages and set to new music. Building a common life takes work, and the leadership of many, and the faithful effort of all. Like the first believers, we are facing a changing world, a culture that brings discomfort, a shifting landscape of priorities and systems. Moving forward doesn't look like going back, but it does require the same unbounded faith, the same love of heritage and tradition, the same spirit of inspired servanthood. As we put one foot in front of the other over these next several weeks, we are called to pray for that same spirit that inspired our ancestors to reimagine life in resurrection light. We walk forward, not toward a new normal, but toward a new creation. May we have glad and generous hearts open wide enough to see that we are already a part of it.