



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the God, who day by day lifts us up higher and higher, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Good morning. Bill already introduced me, and I think I've lost him unless he's in the middle of the communion of saints up there somewhere, which is where your rector spends most of his time. But I want to build on that and thank you for having me here today. What a day it is, the singing, the growing, the life, the laughter, all of the above shows the vigor of this congregation, which I've known for four decades now, and I won't go all the way back. I was only 12 at the time, mind you, when I first knelt. But especially in recent years, through being with your vestries a couple of times, through really getting to know your wonderful clergy as friends and colleagues and fellow sojourners in the leadership of Christ's body, the church itself.

So it's great to be here. It's great to celebrate music, to celebrate youth, to celebrate growth, all of those things. And boy, oh boy, are you getting some music today. A double M day, Matthias and Messiaen, as they say in the French, and you'll hear that at the end of the service. Jonathan, by the way, used to be an assistant organist choir master at the parish I retired from a few years ago in Connecticut, so it all goes together.

But I want to talk about this day and the readings that we have heard and the spirit of being lifted up that is part of the story of the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus, but starting with a, shall I say, somewhat different musical tradition. As a seminary dean, it's always fun to watch the people go forth and what they do later on in life. And one lucky guy got to be the rector of a parish in New York City in Harlem, a great parish, one that was just on the verge of being ready to grow. And you know what happened to that parish? Suddenly, musical artists started showing up. Now, they weren't the ones that were playing Messiaen necessarily, or singing Matthias, or other great Anglican Church folks. Rather, they were hip hop artists. How many of you have heard of hip hop? Raise your hands. Oh, this is much better than I expected, as a matter of fact. So he started working with these hip hop artists. Together, we did a book on the hip hop mass. He became the pastor to them and was known as Papa T. And look at me and believe in your hearts that I got to be known as Papa J. Now, think about that.

But one of the songs you won't hear today, but Bill looked up during the time between the services, is one about the resurrection and ascension of Jesus in the rap and hip hop culture, and it goes like this. Don't worry, I'm not going to sing it. The refrain is simply, "You can't keep a good man down." Isn't that good? There He goes. The ascension of Jesus, and the verses in rap, verse after verse tells the story of Jesus's crucifixion and betrayal, of His sorrow, of His journey to the cross, but you can't keep a good man down. He's going higher and higher and higher in the love and the power of God.

The resurrection story begins in a grand way, but also in a deeply personal way. You recall that the first few Sundays that we've heard that story unfold, much as the narrative and stories of the story project that you are undertaking here at Christ Church right now, but it's the story of Jesus. It begins with Mary Magdalene at the tomb itself, but not knowing who this strange figure in the garden is until He says her name so, so tenderly, "Mary." And she equally tenderly responds, "Rabboni," which means my teacher, my friend, my guide, indeed, my all. And then that's replicated as people recognize the risen Christ in strange ways. Doubting Thomas, by looking and saying, "This is real." Some people who were on the road to nowhere, a town called Emmaus, who met a strange figure, and then their eyes were opened to recognize the living Christ. It goes on and on.

But after the sort of glory of that, the questions begin to happen one after another after another. Throughout this season, we have heard the last prayer of Jesus before He gets ascended and is praying, as Bill said at the beginning of the service, for all of us all the time. We hear Him praying about the fact that He's going to be leaving this earth and returning to the fullness of who God is, the fullness of love, the fullness of hope, the fullness of life itself.

And the people are worried at that last prayer, that last supper together. Jesus says that one of them sitting there is going to betray Him. He says to Peter, the sort of head disciple, you're going to betray me too. You're not going to acknowledge me. And Peter, whose mouth always gets in gear before his brain or his heart, says, not me. And lo and behold, he does it. He says, I am going to be gone, but my love will be with you. And they ask then the basic human existential question, which maybe you've asked too, what's next? What's going to happen to me? Am I going to be alone? Am I going to be abandoned by however this goes?

We pray it in the collect for today, the prayer that brings us together after those wonderful children sang so beautifully. The basic part of that prayer is the petition, do not leave us comfortless. The Latin word from which comfort derives, *confortare*, is one that means do not leave us without power, fortitude, *fortior*. Have you ever felt powerless? Not sure of what was going to happen next? Wondering if you are abandoned, if folks are on your side or not? That's those early disciples in that way. They're not sure of what's going to happen next.

Do not leave us comfortless is their prayer. Do not leave us as orphans, as the psalm was sung beautifully by the choir, by – see, I want to say a nice thing to Jonathan here, too, as we work together. Wonderful. *Orphanos*, the Greek word from which we get the word orphan in English, does mean for those who have lost their parents, but it actually means, in a deeper root, those who are left behind. And the prayer is, don't let us be as those left behind, those alone, those without hope.

During the season of the resurrection, and on this last Sunday after that season and of that season, it's fine to pray those prayers. They're part of our human life. But it is also even more important to pray the prayer, you are with me. You are not leaving me as an orphan. You are not leaving me comfortless because you have risen and are on high in the very presence and the love of God itself. The question that we ask Jesus, what's going to happen to us, is answered by Him, "Lo, I am with you always. Where I am going, you will be also. I am with you each and every day of your life."

The scripture for today does capture our attention. The story from the Acts of the Apostle, which is of the ascension, has the disciples standing there looking at Jesus ascend with their mouths gaping wide open. Good Lord, what's next? And then they go back to the city and find their roots. Or the letter from Peter, which many scholars today don't believe was a letter written at all, the second reading we heard today, but was probably a sermon that might have been preached at a baptism on Easter itself when new Christians were being made. But he is very stark in saying, sometimes you'll feel like the Devil's right after you. Be sober, be vigilant, for the devil as a roaring lion walks about seeking whom he may devour. Gulp. And yet, what does Peter then say? Don't be anxious. Don't be consumed by your fear. You can have fears, but don't be consumed by them. Trust, rest, abide, stay in the love of God.

There's so much to celebrate in this community of faith today. There's so much to celebrate in our lives as sojourners and friends of Jesus, and Jesus as our friend. It is to acknowledge the fears that we have, but to say that the hope is even greater. To acknowledge the questions that we have, but to say that the faith and the trust can take us steps further to know that Jesus ascended not to leave us behind, but to take us with Him.

I have a confession to make to you. I have failed retirement. It happens to priests rather a lot. Now, I'm older than any of the priests here, except we're about the same age, I think, my dear Joyce So let's have the senior club here, you and I. The truth of the matter is that my day job now is a wonderful thing, being the president of an arts and culture charitable foundation in the city of Indianapolis, where I lived and worked for 20 years, gone for 20 years now. They ought to write a song about this, in fact. I'm back home again in Indiana.

And one day, a woman came into my office who said that she had just bought a derelict fire station in the city. I thought, well, that's nice. This is an arts and culture foundation, you know. The firehouse had been abandoned for probably 75 years, and the neighborhood had been abandoned as well, and they felt very comfortless in so many ways. And this woman and some of her friends had the vision to say that they could take that firehouse, they could take some houses around it, they could turn it into a place of arts and dance and music and hope. And do you know what they decided to call it? I asked the question, "What are you going to call it then, Joyce?" And she said, "We're going to call it the Aspire Higher House." And they did. You should see it now. Artist housing and apartments, culinary art as one of the arts, a beautifully restored firehouse, buildings around it, a neighborhood renaissance, things being lifted up.

That's the story of the resurrection. That's the story of our faith. That's the story of our life. That's the story of God's love. Folks, we are not abandoned. We are not alone. Even if we don't know exactly what's next, we know who is with us next and at every point of our lives. And best of all, we can aspire higher. We pray the prayer: do not leave us comfortless. Take us with you to the place you have gone. And the promise is, you can't keep a good man down.

Amen.