

# Under Construction

*Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 5 June 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11.*

Just before Easter, the daughter of a long-time parishioner—her mother had died several years ago—showed up at the church office with a sizable packet of memorabilia. She brought in Trinity Church service bulletins, diocesan publications, Indy *Star* news clippings—various archival treasures dating back to the 1930s, '40s, '50s, and '60s. Lately I've been poring over them, shameless nostalgic that I am.

One of many intriguing items I found is a full-page spread from the *Star* magazine. There's no date on it, but I can tell it's from the early 1950s—I'm guessing fall of 1951. The title: "Building for 2,000 Years." It's a photo essay of the construction of this very Trinity Church building you're sitting in now.

The title plays off a quotable quote from then-rector Laman Bruner. He forecasted that the new structure would endure for 2,000 years. He'll probably turn out to be right. This bulwark was built by the best of old-world practices: Three-million-year-old Indiana limestone as the raw material. Walls laid stone-on-stone, two feet thick. Only the roof needs steel reinforcement. One photo shows "workmen... hewing the stones by hand." Another focuses in on hands holding "fossils found by workmen shaping the blocks." My favorite is of Father Bruner himself. I can't exactly tell, but he appears bedecked in black cassock, one of those long, oh-so-Anglican-looking dark robes. He's climbing a workman's ladder, ascending high, gazing yet higher. The caption reads: "As the walls of the new Trinity church slowly reach skyward, the eyes of its rector... are turned toward the future."

Now isn't that the picture of a rector: Garbed in liturgical vesture, ascending skyward, eyes turned toward the future!

So you may wonder today: Why does this rector wax nostalgic about Trinity Church under construction sixty years ago? What does Trinity Church in 1951 have to do with Trinity Church in 2011 on this Sunday after Ascension Day?

Besides, what *is* the point of the Sunday after Ascension Day? What's the meaning of Jesus' ascension in the first place? What does Jesus' return to God the Father in heaven have to do with anything here on earth nowadays, anyway?

## I

Let me try to sum up some understandings I've found helpful.

Surely Jesus' ascension *is* about his return to God the Father in heaven. And there are lovely implications to that meaning, especially when you reflect on Jesus taking our humanity with him into the very presence of God, as

we sang today in our opening hymn [*Hymnal 1982* #215; text by Christopher Wordsworth]:

Thou hast raised our human nature  
on the clouds to God's right hand:  
there we sit in heavenly places,  
there with thee in glory stand.

Having a place reserved for us in God's presence in heaven is a beautiful hope to hold onto. Yet I have to say, it's always been more than a little above and beyond my comprehension.

So the key for me is realizing that Jesus' ascension is equally, and more immediately, about the mission he came to carry out here on earth—namely, to bring God's healing and life-giving love to this world. And what his ascension means in this light is that Jesus' mission *now continues* through the faithful he left behind *after* he ascended, including through us.

Now notice: What's the inevitable implication of finite and fallible human beings like us bringing God's healing and life-giving love to this world? It's that we too, like Trinity Church back in 1951, are *under construction*.

Under construction: You might even say that until God's kingdom comes in its completeness, until God's healing and life-giving love is "done on earth as it is in heaven," we as the church are constantly under construction. Our lives, this side of heaven, are ever subject to challenge. We face and feel obstacles and opposition from without, doubts and questions from within. So our faith has to be like this stone in 1951—hewn by hand, laid stone-on-stone.

Look at the first disciples. In them, in each of the three New Testament readings we heard today, I see forecasts of my own faith—and maybe yours too?—constantly under construction.

Imagine, for example, how puzzled you'd be if, as in the gospel reading, this great teacher you'd been following was praying at supper about his "hour [having] come." What could he mean when he declares he's glorified in God and also in you, one with God and also with you, one with God so that we all can be one with each other?

Imagine, also, how dumbfounded you'd be if, as in the first reading, from the Book of Acts, this teacher you'd been following appeared alive after he'd died and then ascended above the skies before your very eyes. What else could you pray for than to try to make sense of it all, just as those first disciples themselves were probably doing as they were "constantly devoting themselves to prayer"?

Imagine, too, how unnerved you'd be if, as in today's middle reading, from the letter of Peter (written many

decades after Jesus' resurrection and ascension), you and others close to you were facing persecution, maybe even death for your faith? What would enable you under such adversity to "rejoice... in sharing Christ's sufferings," feel "blessed," "cast all your anxiety on him," as the writer urges?

What those readings and early followers of Jesus say to me is that faith hasn't ever been easy to sustain. Faith has its downs and up, its slumps and surprises. Which is why Jesus before he ascended, made sure not to leave us on our own, not to leave us comfortless. Jesus made sure we'd have the Holy Spirit to stir us and a whole host of examples to guide and support us.

## II

So, if you happen to be looking for a handy devotional guide, I can recommend none better than this volume titled *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* [Church Publishing Inc., 2010]. It's thick but concise. In it are numerous examples worth emulating, from the earliest disciples to the bright lights of our own times. For each of these figures, you get a one-page summary of the person's life and witness along with a prayer and relevant scripture passages. You could take one a day, or one every few days, and what an array of companions you'd meet.

Here's a quick sampling. *Polycarp*: Second-century bishop, serene in his faith when martyred at the ripe old age of eighty-six. *Agnes*: Third-century pre-teen, firm in her faith when martyred at the tender young age of twelve—yes, younger than every one of the St. Richard's Episcopal School graduates who walked down this aisle at commencement ceremonies this past Friday. And on the list goes. There are artists like *Albrecht Durer* and *Lucas Cranach the Elder*... writers like *Christina Rossetti* and *C. S. Lewis*... composers like *Purcell*, *Bach*, and *Handel*... mystics like *Julian of Norwich* and *Hildegard of Bingen*.

Then there's *Eric Liddell*, Olympic athlete... *Harriet Beecher Stowe* and *Frederick Douglass*, prophets against slavery... *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* and *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, liberators... *Sam Shoemaker*, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous ... *Nicolaus Copernicus* and *Johannes Kepler*, astronomers.

What a motley, glorious company they are.

What's common among them?

Along with sharing an ardent commitment to bringing God's healing and life-giving love to this world—to carrying on Jesus' mission in this world—they, like us, lived lives ever subject to challenge. They faced and felt obstacles and opposition from without, doubts and questions from within. Their faith, too, had to be like this stone in 1951—hewn by hand, laid stone-on-stone, under construction.

## III

Our business as Trinity Church today is precisely this: construction. With God's help, we strive to build from the ground up, from the youngest years

on. And we're confident that the mortar of God's healing and life-giving love will take hold and never let go.

Again, a quick sampling:

- This summer, our director of children's ministries, Stephanie St. John, will take sabbatical time to author a curriculum for children that will focus expressly and creatively on *Holy Women, Holy Men*—on selected examples from this book.
- Last Wednesday evening at Christ Church Cathedral downtown, our adult education shepherd Grace Burton-Edwards, along with parishioner Daniel Green, presented seven from our Journey in Faith program who were moved to make a public affirmation of where their journey has brought them—to be confirmed or received into the Episcopal Church. Those seven were among more than *seventy* from the diocese who that evening sought the church's prayers to inspire them along their way.
- And yes, even as I speak, our youth coordinator Missy Roetter is scurrying around in Scotland leading a robust band of teens and co-leaders on a nine-day pilgrimage at the rustic holy island of Iona. The monastery at Iona was founded a millennium and a half ago by another figure in *Holy Women, Holy Men*—Columba, whose feast day happens to be this Thursday, while our teens are there.

All those initiatives and numerous others happen here because our business as Trinity Church is construction. And with God's help, so may it remain.

Which reminds me of one figure from times past I'd like to tip my hat to as I wrap up now—this is somebody you won't find in *Holy Women, Holy Men*, though maybe he should be there, if only for the reason I'm about to share. James Thurber—he was a twentieth-century journalist and novelist. He was apparently pretty adept at making signs, too. His boss at *The New Yorker* magazine, Harold Ross, was constantly redoing the office area where all the writers wrote. The disruptions seemed endless, and through it all Ross kept goading his workers, "Business as usual while we do construction... business as usual." Thurber one day decided to post a sign that got closer to the truth. Thurber's sign said: "Construction as usual while we do business."

Here at Trinity Church let's happily signify and always be about: *Construction as usual while we do business.*

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