



THERE IS INDEED A PLOT

June 2, 2019, The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Ephesians 1:15-23

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History is “a trash bag of random coincidences blown open in the wind.” Or so says one of the characters in Joseph Heller’s novel, *Good as Gold*. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks disagrees. He writes that history “has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is working behind the scenes.”¹ I stand with Rabbi Sacks, as does the author of the letter to the Ephesians.

Today is the liturgical conclusion of the season of Easter and this past Thursday was the celebration of the Ascension, Jesus’ journey to heaven and return to the rest of the Godhead. The season of Easter includes multiple stories of the bodily appearance of the Risen Christ among the disciples. The conclusion of the Easter season and the Ascension means that Jesus is no longer bodily present with the disciples and what will be the fledgling church. In other words, today is the day we acknowledge the predicament of trying to be the church of Jesus Christ, without Jesus being bodily present to tell us how to do it.

This is a particularly appropriate day to be honoring our own Deane Turner with the title of church historian. As one makes one’s way through Deane’s brilliant book of Brick’s history, one is continually struck by what an audacious effort it is to continue to seek being the church. One of the pastors of the original Wall Street church, Ebenezer Pemberton, was dismissed over a hymnbook controversy. The construction of the sanctuary on Beekman Street required extensive loans putting the financial future of the church at risk. The Reverend Dr. Maltbie Babcock served Brick for a scant year before dying.



Every generation of The Brick Church has faced its own set of challenges, its own moment of wondering how the faith community will proceed in the midst of the headwinds it faces. And each generation of The Brick Church has persisted in faith, overcome obstacles, and continued its mission of following Jesus Christ. One could say that this history speaks to the remarkable procession of faithful, committed and talented people who have called The Brick Church home. And that is certainly an essential truth. But that is only a portion of the truth. The deeper truth found in our long and illustrious history is that our story as a congregation, as Rabbi Sacks would say, “has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is working behind the scenes.” The generations come and go, the health and wellbeing of the city rises and falls and rises again, the world at large swings to and fro, the very location of where we worship and serve together has changed multiple times, but there is only one constant, and that is our God, at work behind the scenes.

In challenging times I am sure every generation has wished that Jesus, body and all, would come walking through the door with a blueprint to be followed. But we live in a post-Ascension world. The downside of this is obvious, we cannot go and have a cup of coffee with Jesus and get our questions answered. But this text from Ephesians illuminates the upside of this reality.

Listen again to some of what we are told about Jesus ascending to heaven. This is what we are to receive, “the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints...the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe...” And this is what we are told of Jesus’ position, he is at “God’s right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...all things are under his feet...” And the final phrase of our text, which describes Christ’s presence throughout creation, “the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

As I hear these lines I am struck by movement in two distinct directions. First, I am powerfully taken by the movement of Jesus Christ ascending to God’s right hand. Ultimate power and authority is bestowed upon the one who loved us enough to die for us. The one who was killed by the powers of this world now reigns as the most powerful of all. In the Gospel of John we are told that the



resurrected Jesus still carries the wounds of his crucifixion. Jesus ascension does not include shedding his humanity. Jesus' humanity, his vulnerability, his deep understanding of all of our challenges is brought home to God to dwell for all eternity in power.

And the second movement we hear is of Jesus Christ's presence in the church and thus the world. God "has made Jesus the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." The loss of Jesus' bodily presence does not mean that the presence of Jesus Christ is lost to us. Christ's presence has gone from being localized to spreading throughout the creation and particularly to wherever and whenever we gather to be the church.

The phrase, "the fullness of him who fills all in all" creates an image in my mind of the way water saturates soil. In the backyard of the home I grew up in out on Long Island there was an underground spring that ran down the hill of our property and beneath our lawn. There might be no rain for days but slowly and surely that underground spring was pushing water up into the topsoil until every available nook and cranny was saturated. The grass would grow at an exponential rate. As a teenager that meant the joy of lots of summer afternoons working up a sweat, pushing the lawnmower through thick and muddy grass.

This metaphor can speak to how Christ's presence saturates the church and the world. Sometimes the most essential and important things are happening beneath what we can see. And what God is doing behind the scenes can provide the necessary ingredients to create important growth.

Not being able to see how Christ is present and at work among us can lead us to believe it may not be happening. Too often we think of God's victory over death as a singular act in a single moment at a distant time and place. From death to life in the blink of an eye all those years ago. But transformations and victories are not often created in a single moment. And the power of God at work in the world is not always captured in a visible, dramatic single scene. The victory of the cross is



continuing to unfold in ways we cannot see and the power of God's love in each of our lives and our life together is also continuing to unfold.

Deane, your book makes this theological truth abundantly clear. Countless times in Brick's long and illustrious history there were moments when external conditions were not advantageous for the well being of this congregation. Everything from the Revolutionary War, to the cholera outbreak, to economic turmoil for this city, threatened the future of this congregation. And there are times when Brick's internal challenges appeared to make its future cloudy. Strife between clergy and congregation, economic shortfalls and all manner of difficulties have befallen this church over the years. There are moments in the reading of the Brick Church history that you might fear to turn to the next page if you did not know where we stand today.

It is the gift of your writing, Deane, that has brought these 250 years of history to life. You have embodied the story with flesh and blood and it breathes. And as one reads it, it is abundantly clear that the church is more than an institution, it is a living organism with its own set of strengths and vulnerabilities. But the heart of this living, breathing organism we call the church is Jesus Christ. As the church building on Beekman Street is laid to rest and Brick faced yet another critical juncture in its history, Deane writes, "Regeneration was now afoot."² Deane could have used this compelling line countless times in our history. And I guarantee you it will be applicable in countless times to come in the future of this faithful congregation. There are numerous names of the saints from the past whose faithfulness, perseverance, and wisdom helped make this possible. And those of you sitting in these pews this morning have been and will be bringing your own powerful combination of faithfulness, perseverance, and wisdom to bring new life to this community today and in the years to come. This church has been filled with exceptional, faithful people from generation to generation.

But not a single one of our Brick Church members over the course of our history brought a single faithful action to bear without the presence of the risen Christ within them, filling all in all. Not a pledge was made and fulfilled, a class taught, a



committee chaired, a homebound member visited; not a sermon was preached, a meeting attended, a meal served to the hungry; not a hymn was sung, a prayer prayed, a shawl knitted; not a stunning and extensive history written without the presence of the risen Christ saturating our soil and preparing the ground for abundant growth.

This can be a hard vision to capture in the moment. But over the long arc of history Christ's risen presence in the midst of this people of faith clearly shines through. And Deane, you have given us this remarkable gift, this vision of resurrection playing itself out throughout the many eras and iterations of this people of God. Our deep gratitude to you knows no bounds.

It is believed that the writer and philosopher George Santayana originally wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." Well, Deane, your efforts teach us what the corollary of this statement has to say about those who learn from history. Your powerful and abiding witness to our storied past will empower us to follow in the footsteps of our forebears.

We have our own set of headwinds today. Thanks to your remarkable and vivid capturing of who we have been in faithfulness all these years you have given us the inspiration and courage to live into faithfulness together in all the years to come. There is indeed "a purpose, a point a plot. The author behind the scenes is Jesus Christ. We are in very good hands. Regeneration is now afoot.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1 Sacks, Jonathan, *Lessons in Leadership*, Maggid Books, United States, 2015, p. 56.

2 Turner, E. Deane, *The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York*, Vol. 1, The Corporation of the Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, New York, 2017, p. 79.