

PENTECOST 6B 2024
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
June 30, 2024

There are several fairly easy paths to follow with this morning's lessons. But this day is not an easy day, nor is the path we follow.

One day I met my family at an all too familiar location. We gathered to say goodbye to my mother's last brother, one of four. As I spoke with some cousins I had not seen in years, my aunt came up and gave me a hug. Then she said, "this is just so hard." Despite many months of illness and declining health, the finality of this moment was overwhelming. Without thinking, I said, "It's supposed to be hard. Giving up someone you love is not supposed to be easy."

It's even worse when life is turned upside down and a child is taken before the parents. Life just isn't supposed to work that way. I have had to stand with parents facing that awful moment, somehow finding the strength to say those words from our commendation rite, "even at the grave, we make our song Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

I learned a different perspective on what those words mean as I sat at the bedside of a young man whose life tragically ended. I sat in the hospital room with his brothers after their mother declared she couldn't stay, not even in the building. One brother asked permission to play a song he had recorded on his phone. It was Leonard Cohen's *Alleluia*.

We sat together as monitors slowly tracked the departure of his brother from this life and I heard the words "a broken alleluia." I understood then that at these moments, there is no alternative to a broken alleluia, for it comes from hearts that too are breaking.

Grief touches so many aspects of our lives. But we are taught, and perhaps conditioned, to deny grief. We dress it up with appropriate lighting, surround it with flowers, and pictures and videos of happier times. But the heart knows what the brain might try to deny. Life is forever changed. Even if we can turn and walk away, we are not the same as we were when we entered.

So much of our denial is our futile attempt to recreate a happier past, whether or not it is remembered accurately. I sometimes wonder if that denial isn't also a seed sown by an adversarial being, planted in our culture to prevent us from taking the path to new life that is already laid before us.

We lack a vision of that path. It may be clouded with tears, masked in confusion. We may have to sit patiently for awhile until the fog clears and we can see more than a few steps in front of us. Or, we might just have to take those first hesitant steps, having faith that we really are not at the edge of an imagined cliff.

That is the story set before us this day. It's difficult, in that the way to new life most likely leads us somehow through the pain of death. That is what Jesus tries to show us, that is the struggle of the woman who stretches with all her remaining strength to just get a slight touch of the hem of life itself.

Those who passed this way before us may be like the father of the little girl in today's Gospel. They may be pleading with Jesus to come quickly to us, to make things different from what they are, to enter into the most difficult time and place we've had to experience.

The words come. "Get up." Are we ready to do just that? Can we do the hard part and let go of old pains, of present uncertainty, of obscured visions of a future? Are we ready to get up and rise to the new life Christ promises, not just in some future time, but right here, right now?

Are we ready to trust our illnesses of mind, body, and spirit to the Word made flesh? Can we let go of the crosses that want to keep holding us in death so that we might walk out of the tombs we create for ourselves?

There are hard, difficult questions. Faith calls us from broken alleluias into endless praise. That faith *is* God, not just something we have *in* God. The One who declared what was created as "good" keeps reaching into our tombs to call us into the goodness of abundant life.

Letting go of many aspects of church life is not easy, even if we admit that we're just not able to do all those things anymore. The alternative to letting go is frustration and burnout, often resulting in the falling away of those who worked so diligently to keep the former things from passing away.

On Wednesday of this past week, The Right Reverend Sean Rowe was elected and confirmed to be our next Presiding Bishop. In his address to the House of Deputies gathered at General Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, Bishop Rowe included a quote from Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

"In a time of drastic change one can be too preoccupied with what is ending or too obsessed with what seems to be beginning. In either case one loses touch with the present and with its obscure but dynamic possibilities. What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope. In such an event, courage is the authentic form taken by love."

Letting go of a past we cannot change, and of our desire to control the present and the future is what allows us to participate in the new things God wants to accomplish in and for us. Letting go means those things that were so meaningful are trusted to a

redeeming Love that is capable of accomplishing so much more than we can imagine. Letting go can also mean that God multiplies those things, transforming them and us into faithful people who are part of the continuing, and good, creation of life. But that is God's decision, something we do not and cannot control.

Are we ready for the uncertainty of what that looks like? I hope so. I pray so. And I hope the future generations that come into and through this place will look back on our hard, our difficult times and say, "it was good. Alleluia."