

Strange Joy
A Sermon on Acts 1 and John 17 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 17, 2026

As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of St. Paul's, there is a strange joy among the people of our congregation. There is a strange hope and vision. There is a strange sort of strength and courage.

It is strange for us to be hopeful. It is strange for us to feel courageous. It is strange for us to be joyful when we are together. It is strange, because inside ourselves many of us have reasons to not feel joyful. It is strange to feel courageous, because we have good reasons to feel anxious and fearful. As individuals, we have reasons to feel weak and discouraged.

Those of us who are older may feel we are losing our physical resilience and strength. Those of us who are younger may worry about our children or about the stability of our employment. Many of us are concerned for our daughters, nieces and granddaughters. We are afraid they will have fewer opportunities and worse healthcare than we have had in our lives.

We have reasons to feel discouraged and afraid. As citizens of the United States, it seems like some of our fellow citizens are trying to persecute or punish other Americans. Sometimes it feels like we are living in a nation that could appropriately be named 'The Fighting States of America'. Some of us fear that friends and family members might be detained in dangerous, inhumane conditions or deported overseas.

Four years ago the Russian army invaded the nation of Ukraine. One of the most evil parts of the Russian assault on Ukraine has been the separation of thousands of Ukrainian children from their parents and families. We could not imagine the same thing might happen in the United States, but in the past 17 months more than 5,000 children living in America have been separated from their parents during immigration raids, not at the border, but within the cities and towns of America.

We have good reasons to be afraid and discouraged. So it is strange that when we come together in this place we are joyful. It is strange that, in spite of the tragedies happening in our nation, we are hopeful. It is strange that when we are together we are strong and courageous.

Our situation is much like the situation faced by the first generation of Jesus' disciples. They had good reasons to be anxious and afraid.

In our Gospel passage we hear Jesus' prayer for his disciples at the end of the Last Supper. They do not understand what is about to happen, but Jesus understands what is going to happen. He prays for them to be united, to stay together and care for one another during the time of fear, grief, and anxiety that commences an hour after these words were spoken.

The scene recorded in the first chapter of Acts takes place several weeks later. Jesus had been crucified and rose from the dead. The risen Christ was with the disciples, but in a different way than before. During the weeks after the first Easter, we can imagine the disciples were simultaneously hopeful and uncertain about the future. In the first verse of Acts we read that *After his suffering Christ Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father.*

When the apostles were together with him, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

We celebrate this moment in a Holy Day we call the Feast of the Ascension. This sequence of events might seem joyful and exciting to us. Let's try to remember these events did not seem joyful and encouraging to the first generation of disciples. Like most of their friends and family members, they thought that the Messiah, the Christ would bring some sort of earthly restoration of the glorious kingdom of David.

But the risen Christ did not restore the kingdom to Israel. Their friend and leader had vanished from their sight. They had many reasons to be discouraged and anxious. They did not have clear directions, or an example, about what they were supposed to do next. Jesus told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem because he could sense they were afraid and would be inclined to scatter and return to safety in their hometowns, far from Jerusalem.

After the trial and crucifixion of their friend and brother the disciples knew Jerusalem was a dangerous place to be. The Romans did not hesitate to torture and crucify anyone considered to be a trouble-maker. Yet the disciples managed to find a strange sort of courage and strength. They stayed together. They remained in Jerusalem and prayed together. Together, they found a strange sort of joy and hope. They listened for God's directions and found a way to move forward in courage and strength, together.

The people of St. Paul's Church went through similar times of uncertainty, ten or twenty or thirty years ago. For most of the history of Syracuse, the city has been prosperous and full of new growth. Syracuse was more or less the 'Silicon Valley' of the nation during the first half of the 20th century. Per capita income in Syracuse was among the highest in the nation.

For almost 150 years the city prospered and grew in population and wealth. One of our Bicentennial Steering Committee members was digging through some of the history of St. Paul's and discovered that seventy years ago St. Paul's was the largest Episcopal congregation north of New York City. In the 1950s, more than one thousand people attended services at St. Paul's each Sunday.

Many of the largest and most innovative manufacturers in the United States had operations in the city or close by. But nothing built by human hands lasts forever. As was true in Rochester, Buffalo, and Cleveland, beginning in the 1960s large manufacturers closed down their operations in Syracuse and moved entire industries to places where people worked for lower wages.

A second reason for the decline was due to the hubris and blindness of city and state leaders. In the 1950s they made the tragic decision to build an enormous highway right through the center of the city. The construction of Interstate-81 destroyed the 15th Ward, the historically black neighborhood of our city. When Interstate 81 was built, St. Philip's Episcopal Church and hundreds of other vibrant, beautiful institutions and private homes were reduced to rubble. A stable, prosperous community was destroyed.

By 1980 our downtown neighborhood and much of the city of Syracuse was declining steadily. In 1992, the last remaining downtown department store closed its doors. Vacancy rates increased for many years.

By the time I moved here, in 2016, 30 out of the 55 census tracts in Syracuse had extreme levels of poverty. I lived just a few blocks from St. Paul's and I didn't have an automobile, so I walked to the church each day. At many times of the day and week the sidewalks were virtually empty, as were many of the buildings in our downtown neighborhood.

Some of our neighboring congregations gave up on our downtown neighborhood years ago. The First Baptist Church at the other end of the block, just as large as St. Paul's, left our downtown neighborhood in 1988. They built a large, new church building on Seneca Turnpike in Jamesville.

But the people of St. Paul's did not leave our downtown neighborhood. They had a strange hope, and a strange sort of courage. A group of our members remained at St. Paul's and remained united our witness to the power of God's love in the center of Syracuse. For me, the people who remained at St. Paul's in 2016 were like Jesus' first disciples, responding to his direction to remain in Jerusalem.

These members of St. Paul's understood there were people who needed us to be here, serving them hot meals at the Samaritan Center. There were elders who needed a visit from someone at the church. There were songs to be sung. There were children who needed to hear the story of the Good Shepherd, the one who leads us on the path of love.

The people of St. Paul's did not leave the city when the going got tough. They remained together and they prayed together. They had a strange sort of strength. They had a strange sort of vision. The vision and the strength were given to them by God.

The people of St. Paul's did not know that the low point for Syracuse would come around the year 2010. Fifteen years ago our downtown neighborhood began to grow. For each of the past ten years more than five hundred people have moved to our downtown neighborhood. There are very few vacant properties anywhere close to St. Paul's Church. The sidewalks are almost never empty, and we struggle to find a place to park our cars, even on Sundays!

We have witnessed a sort of resurrection in the city of Syracuse. We have witnessed a similar sort of resurrection within our congregation. We can only guess this has something to do with the work of the Holy Spirit, because God moves in a mysterious way. We never really know exactly how God is working among us.

But this we do know. We know that Jesus' intention is for us to remain together, as God's family. We know that each member of our congregation is to be honored and respected as a member of the body of Christ. We know that God intends for us to welcome the stranger and to care for one another as brothers and sisters.

We know that, although we may suffer the loss of our loved ones we will always find a family and a home at St. Paul's. We know that, although we may feel weak, God's strength will sustain. We know that God will never let go of us. Though we do not know where the road will lead us, we know God walks beside us.

So we are people who hold onto a strange hope. We are people who pursue a strange vision. We are people who are filled with a strange courage and strength. We are people who feel a strange joy when we come together in this beloved place.