A New Normal: Rebirth in the Midst of COVID-19

by Justin L. Addington

Co-Pastor friends of mine have adopted “Easter People” as the theme for their sermons during Eastertide. Likewise, their organist has incorporated the hymn, “Easter People, Raise Your Voices,” as a constant musical element during their virtual worship services of the season. This hymn was penned by an African-American Methodist minister, and calls for the themes of resurrection to permeate all aspects of our lives. It seems to me that the Great Fifty Days of 2020 offer a perfect opportunity for us to examine what rebirth and resurrection can mean, not only for our lives, but for our churches and our world, as well.

This Easter season changed our sense of normal, and presented us with one of isolation and social distancing. As I scroll through Facebook each day, I see countless individuals who are lamenting the loss of normal life. I see many people posting specifically about how much they miss the church. Some miss the act of worship and the joy of making music. Others miss the work and mission of the church, especially at a time when so many are in need. Most posts, however, express how much people miss the fellowship and support they received from other parishioners and clergy. True, we have social media to keep us connected, but these are lonely times!

We have been feeling this sense of holy loss for a few months now, but there are those among us who have felt this way for many years. I do not mean to diminish the feelings of anyone during this pandemic. However, I am beginning to wonder if our feelings might be a little selfish when compared to the feelings of others…especially those who were cut off from the church long before the pandemic began. Our feelings now are the same as those who do not feel welcome because of their past mistakes. Our feelings now are the same as those who do not feel safe because of the color of their skin. Our feelings now are the same those who do not feel accepted because of who they love. You see, feelings of helplessness and separation from the church are not new…they are just new to us.

I would like to challenge us all to stop and think, to put ourselves in the shoes of others, to empathize for just a moment, and to seek to become Easter people. What if we used the feelings that we are experiencing now to better understand the pain of others? What if we used this time to scrutinize the ways the church has pushed people into loneliness and exile? And most importantly, what if we used this pandemic to consider the ways we will be the church when we return to some sense of normal? Perhaps we could return to a new normal, a resurrection normal, one that has been birthed out of sickness, hope, and reconciliation.

In the final stanza of his hymn, Rev. William Marceus James writes, “When the cares of life o'erwhelm us, Easter people, sing this song: ‘Alleluia!’” We are resurrection people, people of rebirth. We talk about these ideals in our sacraments, but this COVID-19 pandemic gives us a real chance to put words into action. Let us plan now for the new ways we will be the hands and feet of Jesus. Let us reach out to those who have been away and welcome them home. Let us set the banquet table. Let us prepare robes and rings. Let us be the risen Christ to the world so that maybe…just maybe…others might come to know and join in our resurrection song.