

## Holding on to the Alleluia

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 27, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

Over a period of three days this past week, I was in attendance at one of the twice-a-year diocesan clergy conferences at Shrine Mont. These are always valuable opportunities to come together with our bishops, clergy colleagues from around Virginia, and staff members from the Diocese for prayer, conversation, education and a bit of rest.

The plenary sessions at the conference were led by Melissa Rau, senior program director at the Episcopal Church Foundation, and were based on the book *Jesus is the Question* by Martin Copenhaver. I hadn't heard of this book, and so as Melissa discussed it I learned it was written to expand on something incredible. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus asked others a total of 307 questions – questions on love (“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”<sup>1</sup>), identity (“Who do you say that I am?”<sup>2</sup>), faith and worry (“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”<sup>3</sup>), and doubt. They were questions used to get information ... or disarm ... or inspire ... or persuade ... or stimulate thought.

So of the many, many questions Jesus asked, and even of the other 183 thrown his way by those around him, how many did he actually answer? **Eight. Eight answers given to all the questions asked.**

In one of our smaller breakout sessions, I was seated with a group that was considering the questions that we seem to ask of Jesus. At one point, the conversation turned to the fear and frustration many feel in dealing with family illness and sudden death, and we tackled the questions we seem to hear so often: *Why is this happening to me? Why must my friend or loved one go through this suffering? Why is God allowing this?*

One member of our group, Davette, sat quietly through most of our discussion before saying something that has clung to me ever since. She said that in the moments when she doesn't understand why something is happening – in the good times and especially in the bad – she knows she can always do one thing, and she does: she turns to “holding on to the Alleluia.”

Holding on to the Alleluia. **Holding on to the Alleluia.** What an incredible, powerful thing to say ... **and** to do. Think about the many “alleluias” the disciples and first followers of Jesus held on to. The alleluia at the birth of Jesus and the alleluia at his resurrection. The alleluias for every miracle he performed and for every person he healed. The alleluia for his love for his disciples

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<sup>1</sup> John 21:15 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:20 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Mark 4:40 (NRSV).

and their love for him. And yes, even the alleluia for his death on the cross and for our salvation through that almost incomprehensible act of self-sacrifice. In moments of joy and moments of sorrow ... from birth in the straw to death on the cross ... from changing water to wine at a wedding to offering wine as a symbol of his blood at that final meal ... from challenging others without sin to cast the first stone to the stone being rolled away from the entrance of his own tomb ... the followers and friends and beloved of Jesus **held on to the alleluia**.

We are entering our annual season of stewardship, and in the coming weeks you will be asked to determine how you will respond to the call to give. Giving of time, talent and treasure isn't just a call to **stewardship**; it is an act of **discipleship**. So as the stewardship letters arrive in your mailboxes and you begin to consider your level of giving ... as you consider how you will be disciples in the coming year ... I want you to do it with one question in mind – not 307, but **one**.

*Where are the alleluias at Christ Church?*

My hope for you as you answer that question has many parts. I hope you will look at **everything** here at Christ Church. I hope you will consider who we are **as** a community and what we do **for** the community. As we did in our discussion a few days ago at Shrine Mont, I hope you will consider how we as a church **inspire** and **persuade** and **stimulate thought**. As you dream for what we will become in the coming year, I hope you will take time to reflect on that answer through the lens of the questions Jesus asked of others, but shifted slightly for our context: *Who do you say we are? Do you love this church? Are you afraid, or do you have faith in what we are doing?*

It is easy to say “Alleluia!” for the wonderful things. But it can also be strengthening to say “Alleluia!” when things are difficult. We need only turn to the Burial Office in the *Book of Common Prayer* to find that assurance, for as we say, “Yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”<sup>4</sup> May we always embrace the good and the bad, the sorrowful and the joyful, with that same word: **Alleluia!**

As we live into our role as disciples and our commitment as stewards, may we strive to be an answer to the many questions asked by Jesus. May we always look for the alleluias in this place. May we rejoice in each one of them.

And may we always ... **always** ... hold on to them.

Hold on to the Alleluia!

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 483.