

# Resurrection Matters



*Church Renewal  
for Creation's Sake*

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# I n t r o d u c t i o n

What the Church needs, what this world needs, are some Christians who are as crazy as the Lord. Crazy enough to love like Jesus, to give like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God—like Jesus. Crazy enough to dare to change the world from the nightmare it often is into something closer to the dream that God dreams for it. And for those of us who would follow him, those of us who would be his disciples, those of us who would live as the people of the Way? It might come as a shock, but those of us called to that life are called to craziness, too.

—PRESIDING BISHOP MICHAEL CURRY<sup>1</sup>

**I was pretty sure I was crazy** the day I handed over \$15,000, ten acres, and the keys to my house to fulfill God's dream.

Cofounding Plainsong Farm wasn't what I had planned for my life. But God started murmuring to me about this ministry in the early years of the twenty-first century. God whispered about the renewal of discipleship integrated with the care of Creation. God called me toward creating a farm where people could reflect on scripture, be encouraged in spiritual growth, and engage in the practices of sustainable agriculture.

It was a lovely fantasy, but hardly practical. And I could ignore a whisper.

By 2008 God had turned up the volume. Now the call was coming clearly. As I began to hear it more fully, I started speaking to others about this vision for ministry. Back then, I cried every time I talked about it. I thought this meant it might be important. I remembered hearing in seminary that tears were once understood as a sign of the

Holy Spirit. But my doubts about my sanity were quickly reinforced when I shared the dream for Plainsong Farm with others. Every member of my small clergy group—and our leader—gave me a blank stare. I talked with my spiritual director; he appeared puzzled. These were professionals at hearing from God and responding. Surely they knew more than I did. I buried the call once more.

I was resistant, but God is patient. However, God knows how to turn up the volume. By 2013 I could not pray without hearing, loudly and insistently, the call to begin Plainsong Farm. That's when I realized that I was afraid to die without trying. I didn't want to have that conversation with my Lord. That's when I began to pray the prayers that led to the founding of Plainsong Farm.

God brought the farm into being; I didn't. We wouldn't be here at all without divine intervention. And we still barely exist. In our start-up phase, we learned that any farm has to get ten years under its belt before it has a solid foundation. So this isn't the story of *how* Plainsong Farm began, because we're still beginning. This is the story of *why* Plainsong Farm began. Even though I thought I might be crazy, I can now see rationality behind the call—logic based on Holy Scripture and contemporary organizational change theory. That logic wasn't apparent to my clergy group or my spiritual director. That is why the church needs this book.

As I faced forward into the dream of the farm, I couldn't see why a farm-based ministry made sense. Only in hindsight has it become clear: this new beginning occurred *both* because of preparation God provided over twenty years of reading, ministry practice, *and* the crazy willingness to leap. My husband and I turned over the keys to our house, our barns, and the use of our ten acres to a family we barely knew. My cofounders and I self-funded a ministry start-up; we worked without pay while we tried to bring a dream to life. I left a perfectly good, compensated ministry role with a

perfectly wonderful congregation just because I couldn't juggle it all anymore.

I thank God for the call of our presiding bishop naming the need for crazy Christians. We do need some crazy Christians. I might qualify.

But in all honesty, I don't think I'm faithful enough to have taken all those steps without a solid foundation in the teachings of scripture, the church, and change theory. I needed to understand *why* God was asking me to take a leap before I was ready to jump. And I needed to know that I wasn't alone.

My guess is that God is whispering in a lot of hearts these days. Both church and Creation are in trouble. The church gets smaller and older every year; the planet gets warmer.

God called both Creation and church into being; God created and loves us. God is acting for us in ways that might not yet be visible—because we humans might not yet see how to bring God's dream to life.

Why would I think that God's dreams for humanity are not yet visible? Because fourteen years passed between the time I first wrote the words "Plainsong Farm" and when the farm actually began. Fourteen years. God's dream was alive long before I was bold enough to act on it. I wrote this book to pass on the lessons that prompted me to take that leap so it doesn't take you—or your church—that long to begin whatever God is whispering about to you.

This book is for both Christians seeking to grow as disciples, and people curious about how Christians think and act for the health of our communities and all Creation. My goal is to take you on a journey that goes from death to life, from decline to renewal, from despair to hope. If you are reading this book as part of your practice of faith, my desire is that this isn't a journey you take alone, but with others. My dream is that you would read this book in communities that already

exist: a clergy group, a church book group, a judicatory staff. My prayer is that God would use these words to equip, encourage, and enable more of God's people to live God's dream. Are you troubled by the news about climate change and the decline of the church? Do you wonder what you might do to make a difference? I hope this book helps you find your next answer and, even more, to take your next action.

To become a crazy Christian takes a leap of faith. Before you jump, you need to be able to trust that there is a reason to leave solid ground. God might be calling you—just as God called me for more than a decade—but resistance is normal. Sometimes you need a reason to propel you in the direction where faith leads you. My hope is that these pages provide you both the inspiration to be a crazy Christian and the logic to recognize that taking one next step as a crazy Christian is the sanest thing you can do.

Nurya Love Parish  
November 22, 2017  
Feast of Clive Staples Lewis

## CHAPTER ONE

# Taking Resurrection Seriously

**M**y first journey into the decision-making process that shapes my church's governance was at the Episcopal Church's General Convention in 2012. It happened to be in Indianapolis, which was an easy drive away. I was curious: what was this gathering like? I signed up to go as a guest for a portion of the meeting. And that's how I found myself in the visitor's gallery of the House of Deputies on July 10, 2012.

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church is a huge event. It combines more than a thousand people meeting for the church's business—over 800 clergy and laity, and over 300 bishops.<sup>1</sup> Add exhibitors, volunteers, and guests, and it can be overwhelming. I wasn't quite sure how to navigate it, but I wanted to know how my church made decisions. So I spent some time watching the decision-making body where I felt most at home: the House of Deputies, where laity and clergy deliberate and decide on the resolutions that govern our common life. On July 10, while I sat in the gallery, Resolution C-095 (Structural Reform) came before that house.

Imagine a vast room the size of a few soccer fields filled with almost a thousand people. Imagine them all facing one direction, sitting at long tables of eight, looking toward a few raised tables of meeting facilitators, note takers, and parliamentarians. Imagine podiums scattered throughout the room with microphones and cameras. Imagine huge screens with the face of whoever is speaking on that screen—because the room is so large that without a screen, a person's



face would be the size of a peanut. Imagine a gallery to the side with another fifty or so people in chairs, watching the floor of the House, where the credentialed voters—elected by their dioceses—make choices for the church’s future. I was in that gallery, watching that huge floor of deputies, still wondering how this all worked.

## Structural Reform

Resolution C095 (Structural Reform)<sup>2</sup> came before the House of Deputies in the customary way. It was passed by a diocese at their convention, then considered and revised by a legislative committee of General Convention. But even though it went through an ordinary process, it was far from an ordinary resolution. It began, “Resolved . . . that this General Convention believes the Holy Spirit is urging The Episcopal Church to reimagine itself.” It called for the appointment of a Task Force “to present the 78th General Convention with a plan for reforming the Church’s structures, governance, and administration.” And it concluded, “Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jer. 29:11).

In the gallery, I leaned forward. What kind of discussion would this be? What would be decided?

Because the House had a time limit, discussion was short. A proposed amendment regarding the makeup of the task force took up most of the time available. Without real conversation on the resolution, it was difficult to tell what might happen. Would a majority of the House of Deputies support the statement that God was calling the church to a new vision? Would the church’s leadership embrace creating a task force that could seek to change many established aspects of our common life?

President Bonnie Anderson called for prayer before the vote.<sup>3</sup> The House hushed for communion with God, then took a voice vote.

The “*ayes*” were resounding. When the “*nays*” were called, there was silence. Among more than eight hundred people, not a single “*nay*” was heard.<sup>4</sup> As people realized what had happened, a ripple of surprise went through the crowd. The Episcopal News Service later reported that the vote “stunned deputies and visitors alike.”<sup>5</sup>

“The Holy Spirit is urging The Episcopal Church to reimagine itself.” In the gallery, I rejoiced. I knew we needed a newly invigorated Episcopal Church—and other newly invigorated churches as well—to serve the work of God in the world.

## **Conversion Matters**

For the first twenty-two years of my life, I didn’t know there was a way to be seriously Christian that included a historical reading of scripture, the acceptance of multiple human authors of a divinely inspired Bible, a willingness to be wrong, a recognition of multiple religions as worthy of respect, and an openness to all people using their gifts in leadership. Somehow in my nonreligious childhood I picked up the impression that the vast majority of Christians were narrow-minded bigots who rejected science, believed the Bible fell from the sky as the literal word of God, adhered to it slavishly at the cost of their capacity for critical thinking, promoted the supremacy of white men as the only legitimate leaders, and condemned most of the world to hell.

My parents didn’t teach me to think about Christianity this way; these were simply vague impressions I formed as a young person in the 1980s. Because I wasn’t raised in any religion, my view of Christianity was from the outside looking in. I could only hear the loudest Christian voices, which were often voices of condemnation. Quieter, more moderate Christian voices existed; they just didn’t reach my less than fully attentive ears.

It took going to seminary—a seeker who discovered the Unitarian Universalist Association and was called to ordained ministry—to teach me that there was more than one way to be a Christian. When I entered Harvard Divinity School, I believed in God, but I didn't know what I believed *about* God. By the time I left, I was a baptized Christian. It would take me another decade to become an Episcopalian, in part because I first encountered the Episcopal Church reading books, not talking to people. Reading Madeleine L'Engle got me through high school, but it took another decade before I met any actual people belonging to her faith tradition who talked with me about their religion, much less invited me to church.

My whole conversion story is outside the scope of this book, but one portion is essential. In seminary I was assigned to read *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* by Jon D. Levenson (Yale University Press, 1995). Because a distinguished professor who practiced Orthodox Judaism wrote it, I couldn't dismiss it as the work of one of those science-rejecting Christians. I picked it up because I had to finish it for class. By the time I put it down, I was forever changed.

*The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* is a dense academic tome. I was biblically illiterate in those days. But even with my limited knowledge, it convinced me that the story of death and resurrection is not only the essence of the Christian faith, but is also echoed throughout the Bible. Ishmael, Abraham's first son, and Isaac, his second, both come close to death and are miraculously raised to new life (Gen. 21 and 22). Joseph is cast into the pit and almost killed, then raised for a new and different life in Egypt (Gen. 37). God both requires (Exod. 22:29) and rejects (Deut. 18:9–13) the gift of every first-born son of Israel. There's more besides. Reading Levenson's book I realized for the first time that the death and resurrection of Christ might both fit a pattern and also be that pattern's fulfillment.

That was an entirely new idea. It took time and practice for me to trust it. But as I spent time around people who took the resurrection seriously, I began to believe. My scientific skepticism gave way to literary conviction. Finally I came to realize that the renewal of the church and all Creation begins exactly here: with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the core story of the Christian faith; we exist to proclaim it. It is indeed good news: if the powers of death could not defeat Christ, then they cannot defeat the Christ's body the church. They cannot defeat all Creation, which exists in and through Jesus Christ (John 1).

## **Resurrection and Renewal**

Today, Christ's body—the church—is in need of renewal. In and through Christ that renewal is already provided. As the church, we need to remember both that resurrection is our core story, and that resurrection—when it happens—is always astonishingly unexpected.

When Mary went to the tomb the Sunday after the crucifixion, she thought she was going to mourn the death of her friend and teacher. She never expected to see him alive, to hear he had been raised, to be sent out to tell a story of life and renewal. All of that was an enormous surprise. After all, every single earthly authority had been arrayed against him. The leaders of Israel and of Rome had conspired to kill him. But they were as nothing against the power of God.

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead teaches nothing else, it teaches this: God can do what we consider impossible. It's been two thousand years since "He is risen!" was first proclaimed. Over the decades and centuries, the church has lost sight of just how extraordinary those words really are. Sometimes it seems like we take the resurrection for granted: a weekly ritual of remembrance, an annual set of holidays to observe. Maybe because I didn't believe in it for the first

half of my life, I still find the resurrection astonishing. Nobody saw Christ exit the tomb. But once the disciples saw and heard that God had acted, Christ was alive, and they had work to do, they counted their lives as worthless compared to the incomparably valuable work of God.

This is the invitation of faith: to trust in the invisible God, whose presence can never be fully seen or comprehended. Not just to trust in the *existence* of a being that cannot be seen, but more—to trust in the *agency* of a being that cannot be seen. And harder still—not just to trust in the agency of a being that cannot be seen—but *to give over your own life* to be used as an agent of that invisible being, that the impossible might be achieved by God, *through you*.

This is faith. Nobody said it would be easy. But if the Holy Spirit is calling the church to reimagine itself, that means God seeks to work in and through us all.

Since the day I finished reading *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, I've gone from dismissing the resurrection to making it the core of my life story. As I've done so, I've come to see that it only makes sense day-by-day. Marge Piercy once wrote, "There is no justice we don't make daily, like bread and love."<sup>6</sup> As a disciple of Jesus, I am called daily to die to self and live for God. That means every day is a kind of crucifixion and resurrection, a chance to begin again. Every day we are called to die to self and live to God, whose nature is Love (1 John 4). As God's people baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, we are first drowned, then reborn as God's holy people.<sup>7</sup> It turns out that this is just the beginning of the life of faith. As Wendell Berry wrote, we are to "practice resurrection."<sup>8</sup>

This doesn't come easily if you are anything like me. It is hard work. It takes practice. The amazing thing is that God really does provide growth and new life when we turn and seek to put God first. The invisible God, through us, bears visible fruit—even against all odds.

As we give our lives to practicing resurrection, we discover the truth that is proclaimed in the ancient prayers of the church: “Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.”<sup>9</sup>

I trust in the resurrection. I also remember I cannot fully comprehend it. I am human like Mary, lamenting the loss of the ones I love. My church is in decline. All Creation is in trouble. But if resurrection is the cornerstone of my faith, I am called to give my life for the new life God seeks to create through me. If you seek to follow Jesus, that is your calling too.

The church is not an end in itself; the church is a means to an end. The church’s mission is to proclaim the gospel and to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.<sup>10</sup> As Norman Wirzba writes, “The clear implication of Christ’s cosmic lordship was that the church, the continuing representative of Christ on earth, was to serve as the medium and manifestation of Christ’s creative and reconciling work to the whole creation.”<sup>11</sup>

Our life of prayer and worship reminds us of the purpose of our lives: as members of God’s Creation, to belong fully to our Creator—loving God first and best. As Jesus taught, we are to love God with “all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27). Worship reminds us who we are, and Whose we are. It knits us back into the fabric of Creation, bringing us into alignment with God as we praise God together. Worship proclaims that every square inch of this planet and every single one of earth’s creatures is made by God, belongs to God, and is beloved by God. As we worship, we witness to the reality that we are members of the body of Christ—a body which rose from the grave, a body which crosses all customary boundaries of place and time, a body which is one with all Creation.

As members of the body of Christ, we’re in the resurrection business.

We're actually not in the maintenance business.

We are really good at maintaining institutions. It's what we know how to do. The altar guild knows how to tend the sacramental vessels; the choir is great at singing; the treasurer is comfortable preparing financial statements. If someone is new in a role, training is often at hand. The focus is on caring for the work of the church with attentiveness and reverence. There is nothing wrong with that—except that it falls radically short of God's call to us. It is wonderful, as far as it goes. It just doesn't go far enough.

If we are to be agents of reconciliation, participants in the loving, life-giving, liberating work of Jesus, it takes our whole lives. It takes being willing to do what we prefer not to do. Because that's exactly how the resurrection began.

## Facing the Cross

The core story we tell as a church—the story of resurrection—begins with crucifixion. It begins with a man in a garden saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet *not what I want but what you want*” (Matt. 26:39, emphasis mine). We call that man Savior and Lord. We say he is our greatest example. One thing Jesus clearly did in the garden was this: he named out loud, to God, his request to avoid the cross. Then, he accepted that his petition might not be fulfilled.

Jesus knew what was coming. He had known it for a while. He had even tried to share his coming trials with his disciples. But they just didn't get it. When he asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter proclaims, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” A few verses later, Jesus “began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Peter takes him aside and says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” (See Matt. 16:15–23.)

Peter’s interaction with Jesus is whiplash-inducing. In one moment he is willing to follow Jesus anywhere. In the next, he’s saying “Except not death, Lord!” Peter likes the status quo: crowds, approval, miracles. Who wouldn’t? But Jesus knows what is coming. He knows that entering Jerusalem will put him on a collision course with the earthly authorities. He also knows that he must enter Jerusalem, come what may, to complete his life and ministry.

Peter stands in for all of us in this instance. We want to proclaim Jesus Lord and God. But we don’t want to follow him to the cross. That sounds and feels terrifying. Nothing in our lives outside the church prepares us for it. The world expects life, health, success, and growth. This is what is praised, acclaimed, and celebrated. But when Christ went to the cross, he was not praised, acclaimed, nor celebrated. He was crucified.

Peter didn’t want Jesus talking about such disturbing things, because he didn’t want them to be true. But Jesus—the way, the truth, and the life—was committed to seeing and speaking truth, come what may. As disciples of Jesus, we have to be willing to speak and hear hard truths. We are to be more like Jesus than we are like Peter. There are three hard truths we need to acknowledge:

1. The church is dying.
2. The globe is warming.
3. We are called to renew the church and safeguard the integrity of Creation.<sup>12</sup> And we don’t know how.

Let’s take these truths one by one.

**The church is dying.** The general data trend is clear: the Episcopal Church is smaller each year. (This is also generally true for the historic



mainline Protestant traditions.) In many places the church is also becoming older. Many congregations will close in the next ten years if we continue on our current course. Dioceses, questioning their financial viability, will shrink and merge. Already, church members are quietly wondering whether their community of faith will last another five or ten years—but are often afraid to ask those questions out loud. Our clergy, bishops, and General Convention deputies know that demographic data indicate a tsunami of church closings is at hand, but the capacity of church leaders to openly discuss this situation varies significantly from place to place and person to person. Silence and denial about our situation does not make it any less perilous. In some regions of the country, church closings are no big deal; there are enough churches, close together, to ensure ample provision for common worship and sacramental ministry. Where I live, however, a single church closing can mean an entire county is without an Episcopal presence. In many places, the situation is critical.

**The globe is warming.** The general data trend is clear: the climate is warmer each year. In many places it is also less stable. If we continue on our current course, the seas will rise and coastal communities will be driven inland. Climate-related migration has already begun. Already, individuals are quietly wondering how their grandchildren will cope someday as adults in a changed climate—but are often afraid to ask these questions out loud. Our elected leaders, scientists, and the global community know that temperature data indicate extraordinary shifts in ecosystems are likely, but the public capacity to discuss this situation varies significantly from place to place, political party to political party, and person to person. Silence and denial about our situation does not make it any less perilous. There is nowhere on the globe that will not be affected by climate change, but communities which are already vulnerable—poorer communities, island nations—are losing their capacity to survive in their current location. In many places, the situation is critical.

**We are called to renew the church and safeguard the integrity of Creation. And we don't know how.** The parallels in the two above descriptions are intentional. The crisis in church and Creation mirror each other. Both the church and the planet are the work of God. Each are called into existence by God; the Holy Spirit breathes through each. The church, the body of Christ in the world, is meant to thrive; all Creation, which was made through Christ, is meant to thrive. God desires life and health for the church and all Creation. But that's not where we are. And we don't quite seem to know how to get where we belong.

### **Risk for the Sake of the Gospel**

If we knew how to stop the decline of the church and the warming of the globe, we would have done it already. But despite many efforts to halt both trends, they continue. Many people work tirelessly for the stewardship and renewal of the church; many people work tirelessly for political and scientific solutions to climate change. But the data continue to accumulate year after year: smaller church, warmer planet. One day—we know not when, and perhaps not even during our lifetimes—these trends will halt and reverse. But we can't predict that day. Even less can we predict what chaos and sadness will arrive before it does.

If we are Easter people, we can face hard truths in a way that Peter—before the resurrection—could not. We know that we already have a risen Savior; we know that God does not intend the death of the church or the planet. And we know that denying the difficult does not make it go away. On the contrary: only as we face into the truths before us can we find our way through them. If they are too hard for us to face on our own, that's fine, because we aren't on our own. We are in Christ.

I had to die to my notion of what a normal ministry career would include in order to begin Plainsong Farm. I had to die to my

expectation for a normal salary. I had to die to my desire to understand and manage my own life. These are not small things to let go. But Jesus tells his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Luke 9:23–24).

And that is true. As Matt Overton, a youth ministry innovator, writes, “I knew that if the American church was ever going to be born again in the twenty-first century, it would need people willing to risk everything for kingdom ideas that were worth their very blood, sweat and tears. The church needed to start swinging for the fences. . . . The gospel is, at its core, a risky proposition by God in behalf of human beings. It promises no security, despite our best attempts to deify security and regularity in our worshipping communities.”<sup>13</sup>

If the resurrection is the core of our faith, then ordinary maintenance mode just won't do. We serve an amazing God and God provides a means for us to be amazing witnesses. “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth” are not just a few words we recite at the beginning of the Sunday liturgy; they are a way of life. To glorify God we must be willing to let go of the familiar and trust that God will lead us. Taking resurrection seriously means acknowledging the real, hard truths that are before us, proclaiming that Christ is risen, and asking God to do a new thing through us. We are called to trust in the invisible to achieve the impossible—against all odds.

If there is any group on earth that has the wisdom needed for a warming planet, it is the people of God who steward the ancient words and rituals that show the way when there is no way. The Holy Spirit is calling the church to reimagine itself. We begin at the beginning: in the face of death and despair, we proclaim resurrection.