

## Stay in the City

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Opening Eucharist for the Inaugural "City of God" Urban Ministry Conference

Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis, Tennessee - May 19, 2000

Gospel: Luke 24: 36b-49

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Risen Christ. On behalf of the clergy, staff and parishioners of this parish, and on behalf of the College of Preachers, with whom we are partners in this National Conference on Urban Ministry, we want to welcome you to historic, downtown Calvary Church. We are humbled and honored by your presence and by your significant ministries. We pray that we will learn from each other, and be renewed for this bold task of urban ministry.

Because our time is so very important, let's go quickly to reenounter our risen Christ. We will meet the resurrected Christ in the Gospel and in the city. Come with your imaginations, and let's meet this Christ of Easter who comes to each one of us this very evening. The Easter encounter is timeless. It's not just about disciples back then; it's also very much about us, the disciples here and now. The spirit of the risen Christ appears to us, and words from His heart say to yours and to mine, "Peace be with you."

Peace! Because you and I do the hard work of urban ministry, we need shalom. We must have that interior peace. This risen Christ says to us over and over again: "My peace be with you in the doing of your work of urban ministry."

Because we live on the edge of doubt and faith, He says again this very night, "Trust me! I am with you. Here are my hands to show who I am. Here are my feet to prove who I am. I'm with you. If you cannot believe that, then give me some fish, because I'm hungry. Will you come and break bread with me? I will come to you in the breaking of the bread. Always! That's my promise. Let's have a meal together."

Then in this Gospel story, the Risen Christ does what He does so intentionally. He breaks open not just the bread, but also the Scripture. He does some Bible study with us. He says, "Did you not know that through Moses and the prophets and the psalms, all of that was a preparation, an epiphany for me? Have you forgotten the old, old story that is always the new and renewing story? Have you forgotten it? You can go back to it, because I'll renew you there."

He says, "Did you not remember that I told you I must suffer, and I will suffer with you. I will suffer with the cities of the world. I must die, and I will die with the pains of the cities. Have you forgotten the story, because it's a brand-new story, more vigorous now at the break of a new millennium than maybe it's ever been? I will be with you because I have risen. I am within you."

It appears that Jesus is about to turn and leave, having given us that reassurance. But then He says, "Oh, one more thing, please take note of this. I want you to stay in the city. I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay in the city and become clothed with power from on high." It's

right there. I'm not making this up. Christ says, "Stay in the city. I want you to stay in the cities of America. I want the church to remain at the heart of the cities."

"Others may take road trips to experience the power of the risen Christ. There will be those who go down the Emmaus Road; I will reveal myself to them, as well. There will be those who go down the desert road to Gaza. I will reveal myself to them as I do in my servant Philip. Some will go to Damascus, and on the way, there will be an encounter, an epiphany, a revelation. But I want you to stay in the city. I want you to stay in Austin and Alexandria and Memphis and Cleveland. I want you to stay in Dallas. I want you to stay in Baltimore, in the city of New York, in Kansas City. I want you to stay in your city.

"Others may move to the suburbs. Others may go beyond the suburbs to the exurbs, where it seems the grass is so green; but I want you to stay with the concrete and the steel in the heart of the city. I want you to stay there with courage, even when others would leave because of the poverty and complexity and because the cities of the world today are filled with violence and abuse, particularly of our children. I want you to stay because I need you there. I need you in the cities. I need you as my presence, my hands and my feet. I need you."

So stay in the city. Stay where there are drugs, because we need the risen Christ. Stay where there's crime, because we need the risen Christ. Stay where there are AIDS deaths by the dozens per day. Stay there, because, says the risen Christ to each one of us, "Did you not hear the texts that you were just singing?"

Where cross the crowded ways of life,  
Where sound the cries of race and clan  
Above the noise of selfish strife,  
We hear your voice, O Son of Man.

O Master, from the mountainside  
Make haste to heal these hearts of pain;  
Among these restless throngs abide;  
O tread the cities' streets again.

Till all the world shall learn Thy love  
And follow where Thy feet have trod,  
Till, glorious from Thy heaven above,  
Shall come the city of our God!

Stay in the city. Stay in the city until you're clothed with power.

Those of us who work in urban ministry, you must be somewhat like me. You try to do it on your own, and until we're clothed with power, nothing is going to happen. So stay in the city until we are clothed with power, or else we will be naked in our powerlessness. But remember, power is not presiding over others, but standing beside others, serving others, washing feet.

For this last decade, it's been my deep privilege to represent two presiding bishops involved in strategic mission work with the Episcopal Church in Brazil. The Episcopal Church in Brazil is a small, struggling, blue-collar, but very significant presence.

Some years back, I had one of those encounters that changed my life again. I had made an interior trip from Porto Allegre into Baje, when my interpreter became ill and had to fly back to Sao Paulo. This presented quite a problem for me, since I don't know Brazilian Portuguese. I was staying in a Brazilian family home, and the next morning I was awakened and told that I would meet a visitor who would be my companion for the next four days. His name is Bispo Olavo Ventura Luis, the Presiding Bishop of Brazil.

At 6 a.m. Bishop Olavo bounded into breakfast while we were drinking our strong Brazilian coffee and eating bread. He said to me, "Reverendo Dog," (he always called me Reverendo Dog; Doug sounds like "Dog" in Brazilian Portuguese.) "I'm Bispo Olavo." At that, we began our four days together. I soon realized I was traveling with Jesus.

I had a great experience on the road with him and in his home with his wife, Marie Angela, and their children-- three of high school age and one in college. I fell in love with them, but I mostly fell in love with Olavo. Less than six months later, while on a mission trip in Mozambique, another Portuguese-speaking nation in the south of Africa, Olavo was bitten by a malaria-carrying mosquito and was dead within ten days.

Like the poet said about Abraham Lincoln, I would say about Bishop Olavo--when he died, it was like a great tree fell, and it leaves a vast open space against the horizon. He was an Archbishop Tutu for Brazil.

About six months later, our Presiding Bishop, Ed Browning, asked me to go back to Santa Maria, Brazil, to represent the Episcopal Church in America at the consecration of the new bishop, Jubal Neves.

I arrived in Porto Allegre and was met by the eldest son of the late Bishop Olavo. We greeted one another with warmth and tears and love. Then he asked me, "Where are your vestments, Reverendo Dog?" I hadn't brought any vestments with me because I didn't know I was to be a part of the Consecration Liturgy. Nonetheless, he put me on a bus and sent me to Santa Maria.

I arrived at Santa Maria and was about to go into the large community building in the city center where the consecration was to take place, when I saw the high school-age children of Bishop Olavo. In their hands they carried their father's vestments. We hugged and wept with each other. They said, "Reverendo Dog, we would be honored if you would wear our Daddy's vestments." With a great lump in my throat and heart, I put them on. I felt like I was being clothed with power. I didn't know the language well at all, and was only just beginning to learn the people, but I had been clothed by them, and by God.

In the doing of the hard but vitally important work of urban ministry, again and again we will find ourselves clothed. We are asked to do impossible things in this urban ministry, but we are given God's clothes, God's power, God's blessing. And that will be sufficient.

So, stay in the city until you're clothed with power from on high. It will not be yours. It will be beyond you. It will be power within us that is not of our own, and it will make us different and sufficient. We'll become new again. We will become Easter people when we allow ourselves to be clothed with God's power. We'll become Christ for the cities of America, clothed in holy power for the task.

To use that wonderful C. S. Lewis image, it's as if we are on spiritual barbells, Christ is the sacred weight lifter. The Risen Christ leans under us and groans to lift us up. Along with us, He lifts all of the cares, the oppression, the despair, the violence of the city, and says, "The city will rise again. It will be made new again. It will be mine again. The cities of America will be mine again."

So, stay in the city. Stay in the cities of America. The church will be clothed with power from on high. Lift up the city. It will become new. And, our cities will become "the City of our God."  
Amen.