Warm Welcome (based on Genesis 18:1-14 and Luke 10:38-42)
by Rev. Alex Constable on July 20, 2025

On my birthday (June 24) I was in the delightful, if unusual, situation of walking the streets of Paris, France, with my partner Sharon. It was a feast for the senses, taking in all the sights, sounds and smells. The architecture was quite different from here in Nova Scotia, with an emphasis on stone carving and wrought iron work, all if which takes a great deal of care in maintaining. We passed a building that was partially hidden with scaffolding and clearly, under renovation.

A sign on the wall read “Restauration”, but the spelling surprised me: *RESTAURATION*, very similar to the word Restaurant. Words like Diner or Eatery describe the dining or eating that takes place. But ‘Restaurant’ provides a deeper meaning: to welcome, to serve and feed, is to restore… not just on the outside, but inside too. In this way, every Church is a restaurant – always about the joyful work of restoring people, and always undergoing restoration, both within and without.

In a few days my sister and her husband will be coming to visit. They are both people of deep faith who try to live in unity with the Spirit of Jesus, as they experience him. Before we understood they were willing to drive all the way from Sackville to Annapolis Royal to visit us in our home, we thought of meeting them in Wolfville and treating them to dinner. I immediately thought of ‘The Church’ – formerly the UCC in Wolfville, now a pub and restaurant. Sharon cautioned me against the idea, feeling that as abstainers, they might not appreciate the humour.

Still, it isn’t such a bad transformation for a church building – inviting people in to be welcomed, served, fed and restored. I’m reminded also of the former UCC in Bridgetown, now an art gallery and live music venue, nurturing the human need for art, music, creativity and beauty. Is it a tragedy or a victory for these congregations?

It depends on one’s point of view. As followers of Jesus, most of us would agree that we’re called to welcome people, to feed their souls, and to serve them, after the example of Christ. It’s true that the Christian teaching that goes on here, the imparting of doctrine, the acts of service to the wider community, may be lost.

However, I’m fairly certain that The Church Pub and Restaurant sees numbers of guests every week that the former congregation could only dream of. In terms of financial sustainability, it’s no contest. The beautiful stone structure may stand a better chance of survival now that it’s no longer a centre for religion. But is it still a church?

When I consider the many church closures across the lands once called Christendom, I sometimes want to get ahead of the game. If church buildings are closing, only to re-open as restaurants, art galleries and music venues, why not get into the business right away, beat the entrepreneurs at their own game? Host weekly take-out suppers, have concerts all year… if we just try hard enough, we can pull it off. We can survive. Then I take a look around and remember: none of us survives this life; our hope is in the next. I remember Jesus at the Temple, flipping tables over in frustration.

During our Tuesday morning Bible and Brew sessions, we sometimes take a break from the bible and read a different book. This time it's Elaine Pagels' *"Miracles and Wonder: the Historical Mystery of Jesus"*. The author draws on her study of the New Testament, and other early writings, to try to assemble the puzzle pieces of the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith. In one chapter, she compares different sources on the meaning of Christ's resurrection: did they believe in the rising of a fully physical body, or in a transformation, a transition from flesh to spirit, from a physical body to a spiritual one?

Interestingly, there's no firm consensus. We have Peter and James in favour of the bodily resurrection, for example, and Paul writing about the change from passing matter to imperishable spirit, still a kind of body but having changed from the old to the new nature – like seeds and flowers, caterpillars and butterflies. There's pretty strong, though far from unanimous, support among contemporary, church going Christians for the allegedly orthodox view of a bodily resurrection.

Yet most people of faith who hold to an afterlife, including those who attend no church, would believe in something like Paul's transformational resurrection. I'm not out to convince you of one or the other. I'm interested in how this Christology applies to the Church as Building and as community. Some of Jesus' very best friends were not hip with Paul's view, including Peter, who objected to the very notion of Jesus' coming death crying, "God forbid it!" Mary Magdalene tried to embrace the resurrected Christ only to be cautioned, "do not cling to me".

Still today, Christians and others are appalled at the bodily death of another church building, and would wish it to be kept intact and imperishable for aeons. It's understandable. Who would wish for the death of someone they love, even if that someone is a building? Every Easter, Jesus invites Thomas: "place your hand in my side, touch my wounds and know that it is me".

Can we expect a similar resurrection for struggling, dying churches? Jesus, whom the Church celebrates as Divine yet completely Human, was in need of rest, food and a warm welcome when he came to the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. God so often comes to us as the vulnerable guest. Martha, God bless her, served him to the best of her ability and beyond, so intent in her devotion we can hear the fear of failure in her cry, "Lord, why won't she help me??"

Mary, meanwhile, listens in Zen-like reverence at Jesus' feet. Are we, the institutional Church, missing something? Have we traded our inner peace for the urgent frenzy of keeping the whole shebang going? How do we get to Easter without Good Friday?

Abraham and Sarah were so old they had just about given up on new life, in the form of a child. That's how they were when 3 travellers came to their tent seeking a welcome and a meal. Was it their loss of this hope of keeping life going that allowed them to say, "Ok, we have a calf we've been fattening for our own food, but you only live once, and these people need a proper meal – so we can give it away".

And just at the moment when they're really prepared to give up what they could have held onto that the three who were angels reveal the coming of new life: a child called Laughter, in the winter of their lives.

I've had my Martha moments – maybe you have too – dreading what will happen to the Church, afraid our best efforts will fail, wondering why there aren't more helpers… All the while, our sisters and brothers outside the church walls still seek a spiritual life and yearn for a world of peace where all are fed. As Elaine Pagels and others have suggested, it's no coincidence that it was after the temple was destroyed, after the last calf, lamb or dove was sacrificed, that the new Christian faith was born… a *restauration* that no building or religious system could contain.

On this day, holy as all days are holy, in this place, as sacred as any and every home, let us draw toward the central flame of our faith, and let the Spirit warm our hearts. Let us leave aside cares and fears, that we might take this moment to bask in the grace and peace of Christ, who is our neighbour. God, grant that we your people might be restored, that we may welcome and restore one another. Amen.