

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
Sunday, May 3, 2026**

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**The Fifth Sunday of Easter
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento**

As you may know, I sometimes get tunes in my head that haunt me and shape my thinking. This week that tune was an old Blue Grass standard from the Seldom Scene. I won't sing it for you, because it requires one of those high, penetrating, nasal, bluegrass falsettos. The chorus goes

I'm working on a building, working on a building,
It's a Holy Ghost building for my Lord, for my Lord.

In the verses all kinds of people, gamblers, drinkers, even preachers, are exhorted to quit what they're doing and work on the building too.

And although it runs closest to the Letter from Peter, I think this song about the Holy Ghost building is behind the message of the Gospel too. So I'm going to take a look at that building, first the one we're called into in the Gospel, second the one in St. Peter, and third, our present Holy Ghost Building.

In the prologue of John's Gospel, we were told that the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and that when he was with us we saw his Glory, full of grace and truth. There is just one problem now, here in John 14. If we place ourselves at the scene, we are at the last supper, and Jesus has just washed our feet, showing us how he wants us to treat each other. Now he returns to the table, and tells us he is going away. What will happen to us without him? Will his glory go with him?

Now I admit that I've always been a little puzzled by what place "Glory" has in this section of John. It turns out it is crucial. Jesus begins this section of John, a little before what we hear today, by speaking about glory, saying that the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him. When we think about what glory means in the first Testament, it is the shining light that signifies the presence of God with his people. It shone on Moses at Mount Sinai, and then at the Tabernacle that travelled with Israel through the desert. When the Temple was built, both first and second, it was thought that the Glory was present there. John has spent the Gospel showing that Jesus, not the Temple, is where God is glorified. If glory is the sign of God's love and presence with his people, it makes sense that it will shine out intensely at the Cross, where God's love for the world is revealed.

The thing is, that Jesus will truly die on the Cross. He will no longer be physically present, dwelling among us. He tells his followers not to be troubled or afraid. He is going to his Father's house, where there are many dwelling places, and he will prepare a place for them there. Besides, he tells them, they do know the way. When Thomas questions him, Jesus replies that he himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is going to his Father, but they already know his Father, because they know him. When Philip says "Just show me the Father and I'll be satisfied" Jesus replies that he has already shown them the Father in everything he is and everything he does. "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe because of the works themselves." Jesus then says that his followers will continue to do good works, so that the Father will continue to be glorified. Jesus will not take God's glory with him. It will remain with his followers on earth, an ongoing manifestation of God's love for humanity.

Only next week does Jesus explain that all this will work through the Holy Spirit. He is in the Father, and the Father is in him, but because he is in the Father, his followers are in the Father. We continue to have God with us through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. That is how we become a living Temple, a dwelling for God. Together we become the Holy Ghost Building.

Peter takes this idea and runs with it. "Like living stones," he says, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." For me, that image of living stones is very powerful. I imagine translucent stones, sparkling with light, dotted with colorful jewels. I also imagine something like an Inca wall. Three of my relatives live in Peru, and from time to time they send me pictures of walls, still standing centuries after the Empire passed. The Inca picked up stones where they found them, and shaped them into irregular 3D trapezoids that fit together without cement. I imagine the temple like this, not made of blocks that are all the same, but of beautiful, individual stones, fitting together because God has formed them into community. Each community becomes a place where God's love is concentrated and magnified and made available to the world.

When we understand who Peter is talking to, the image becomes even more vivid. A case can be made that the letter was actually written by Peter, or by one of his followers now living in Rome. But the letter is being sent to new converts out in places like Cappadocia which are now in modern day Turkey. Peter, at first hesitant to admit Gentiles, is now encouraging Gentiles from the far edges of the Empire to join together. He tells them that they are like Jesus, irregular stones, rejected by some, yet chosen and precious to God. He tells them that together will form a new Temple where God's presence can dwell. Interestingly, a

few centuries later, Cappadocia will be the nursery for four of the Church's greatest saints, all defenders of Christ's humanity and divinity, namely Macrina, Basil, and the two Gregories.

When I turn to our own Church, living stones here on the corner of 15th and Jay, I look at both the physical building and the spiritual building with a new realization. Perhaps it's because that Bluegrass song is so emphatically in present tense. "I'm working on a building, working on a building." As any Junior Warden can tell you, and indeed any homeowner, the building is never really finished. There is always something that needs to be done, and its often something major. A new roof, a new heating system, new electric panel, and so on. The same is true of the Spiritual Building.

But if you read the story of Saint Paul's, physical and spiritual, it's a story of constant recreation and reinvention. If fire gets one church, you build a new one, and if a storm wrecks that, you build the next one out of stone. Midcentury, neighborhoods were torn down to make way for freeways and office buildings, and the base of the congregation disappeared. The church became an urban mission serving those still left in the city's core, office space for Episcopal Community Services. But this building was too beautiful and too vital to be office space, and a new spiritual community formed and brought it back to life as a church. Even now, we are re-making ourselves. Newer members are holding up the crucial roles of Junior and Senior Warden, joining the choir, becoming acolytes and readers. New, sparkling stones are being added to the walls. We will see what the future brings when a new curate has been found.

The underlying truth is as astonishing as it was to Phillip and Thomas. We truly are in the Father, and in Jesus, through the Spirit. As we come together, working together in love, God's glory dwells within us. We are living stones, a holy temple, a royal priesthood, a people called and chosen. We are working on a building, a Holy Ghost building, for the Lord, for the Lord.