

*A sermon given on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### *A House of Hope*

In his tales of Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor tells of that legendary northern Minnesota town, where winters are fierce and unpredictable. As a contingency for the sudden winter storm, school children in Lake Wobegon who live at some distance from their school are each assigned a "Storm Home" – a home closer to the school where the child can stop and stay if the weather should suddenly get too fierce for them to make it to their own home. Early in the winter each child receives a memo: "Your Storm Home is with the (such-and-such) family."

Young Garrison was assigned to the Krugers, a kind elderly couple. Their house was appealing, with a tidy yard surrounded by a neat fence. Week after week, the boy would walk past his assigned Storm Home and imagine the day when, in the midst of a driving blizzard, he would seek refuge there. A fire would be lit on the hearth; hot food on the table; a comfortable quilt on the guest room bed. Garrison even imagined that Mr. Kruger had once stood at the edge of the school playground, and said to the principal – "There, that little boy over there – we would like *him* for our storm-child."

How reassuring it was to know that he had a Storm Home. Wouldn't I love to have a Storm Home? Wouldn't you?

Far from an imagined town in the North Woods, in a place not cold and snowy, but hot and dusty, there is a small, freshly-painted, cream-colored house with a wooden fence and a gate in front. This is the very real town of Ocean View in South Africa. The house is the new Foster Home for children affected by HIV, a home established by our partner congregation of St. Clare's Anglican Church.

South Africa has an estimated two million orphans as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Our friends in the Diocese of False Bay have set as a goal the establishment of a parish-based foster home for these orphaned or abandoned children in every congregation of the Diocese. For the past year, St. Paul's has supported this project in Ocean View, providing half of the purchase price for the house and assisting with its operating expenses. In due time, foster parents were selected to live in the home – members of St. Clare's: Warren, a gentle man who has planted beans and squash in the back yard; and his wife Sally, a former child care worker. And early this year the first four children were brought to the home, ages 4 to 6: sister and brother Ayesha and Tony; and two brothers, Denino and Deniquo.

Our parishioners, Dr. Richard and Mary Nodar, have just returned from their three-month mission of health care, tutoring, and spiritual companionship in Masiphumelele and Ocean View. Each week they made their way up the scrubby hill on Cheetah Street, lined with small houses and not a few shacks, to the welcoming home. While surrounding houses have dusty patches of

dirt out front, Warren has lovingly created a tiny oasis of green grass and vegetables. Rich and Mary, on behalf of St. Paul's, brought supper every Thursday. The children would greet Dr. Rich at the gate, begging for one of his magic tricks. Mary would bring crayons. Warren and Sally would receive the meal with a reciprocal kindness. The new family and their American guests would share supper.

In honor of St. Paul's support, the diocesan AIDS officer, Reverend Pamela, had proposed naming this new place "St. Paul's Foster Home." Meanwhile, unaware of that plan, the foster mom Sally was hoping it might be called "House of Hope." And so it was that just last Sunday afternoon, at the official opening and blessing of this new oasis of love and care, its residents proudly unveiled – for the Nodars and for us – a hand-lettered sign proclaiming the new name for this AIDS foster home: "St. Paul's House of Hope."

A place of shelter for abandoned and orphaned children. A Storm Home for its residents. A place for new beginnings. A House of Hope. Wouldn't I love to dwell in a House of Hope? Wouldn't you?

*On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. [And] suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them [and said,] 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. [Luke 24:1-5]*

"He is not here, but has risen." In that moment, the stone which had been rolled away from the tomb was no longer just a rock. That stone was now a cornerstone. The doorway to Christ's Tomb was now nothing less than the Cornerstone for Christ's House of Hope. In this House of Hope would Jesus' dejected and demoralized disciples be given strength to renew their witness to their Lord. In this House of Hope would widening circles of believers hear the proclamation of St. Paul that "all would be made alive in Christ." In this House of Hope would thousands, hundreds of thousands, hundreds of millions, come to know themselves as inheritors of that very resurrection which we celebrate this day.

"What are you doing?" shouted the officials, when Jesus drove the cheating money-changers from the Temple on an earlier day. "What sign can you offer to establish your authority?" they had demanded. And Jesus had said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He spoke, as his disciples later understood, not of the Jerusalem Temple, but of the temple of his body. After three days, his body would be raised. And so it was. And Christ's body, Christians proclaim, is now the Church – the community of all believers. God's Temple is Christ's Body. Christ's Body is the Church. The Church is Christ's House of Hope.

Hope is born anew this day. Our Christian hope is based not on the depth of Jesus' moral teachings – deep and wise and godly though they are. Our Christian hope is based not on the record of his healings and miracles – powerful signs of his identity though they were. No, in the end our Christian hope is based neither on wisdom nor on miracles; our Christian hope is based

on *this* day, grounded in the Resurrection. Grounded in the proclamation that grace is more powerful than sin; that love is more powerful than hate; that life is stronger than death.

The House of Hope which is the church, in its best manifestations, is like the Lake Wobegon child's Storm Home – a place for the embrace of unconditional love, a place for shelter from the tempests of life. But the House of Hope which is the church is more, as well. It is like the St. Paul's House of Hope in South Africa, which is about not only shelter for the present, but even more vitally, about re-birth for the future. To have rescued four little children named Ayesha and Tony and Denino and Deniquo from abandonment to the streets is not only to give them shelter and comfort for the present, but also to proclaim that they, and others like them, are, by God's grace, worthy of a future.

There is no greater privilege than to participate with God as agents of hope and resurrection. There is no higher calling than to serve as such an agent, in South Africa, in Gaza, in Cleveland, in our own workplaces and homes. And there is no greater delight than for us to claim this promise for ourselves, as well. You and I are beloved of God, even today. You and I are made worthy – through Christ's sacrifice and by God's grace – made worthy of new beginnings and renewed life with God. In the midst of whatever fears, whatever failures, whatever frailties we now suffer, you and I share in the promise of a future with God, always. That is the House of Hope in which we are privileged to dwell.

The Risen Christ is an embodiment of hope. The Risen Christ is an embodiment of the common future of God, humankind, and all the world. The Risen Christ is the embodiment of the Gospel affirmation, spoken 1400 years later by a mystic named Julian, that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

Welcome, dear friends, to Easter. Welcome, happy morning! Welcome to the Risen Life in Christ's House of Hope.

Amen. Alleluia!