

Pastoral Reflection
Feast of the Ascension
May 29, 2022

I want to share with you one of the best COVID meditations I have read. The title is, "What Does It Mean to Set Jesus Free" by Diane Butler. I believe it is particularly appropriate for the Feast of the Ascension as Jesus returned to the Father. Diana shares a moment she experienced while at prayer before the icon of Jesus in the Washington National Cathedral.

What Does It Mean to Set Jesus Free?

Church historian Diana Butler Bass shares a moment she experienced while at prayer before the icon of Jesus in the Washington National Cathedral:

“Get me out of here,” the voice said again.

I stared up at the icon. “Jesus? Is that you?”

“Get me *out of here*,” I heard again, more insistent now.

“But Lord . . .”

The chapel fell silent, but I know I heard a divine demand for freedom. . . .

Millions of Americans have left church behind, probably many more have left emotionally, and countless others are wondering if they should. One of the most consistent things I hear from those who have left, those doubting their faith, and those just hanging on is that church or Christianity has failed them, wounded them, betrayed them, or maybe just bored them—and they do not want to have much to do with it any longer.

Bass reflects on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our building-bound Christianity:

As millions have discovered in these many months, Jesus was not confined to a building. Jesus was around our tables at home, with us on walks and hikes, present in music, art, and books, and visible in faces via Zoom. Jesus was with us when we felt we could do no more, overwhelmed by work and online school. Jesus was with us as we prayed with the sick in hospital over cell phones. Jesus did not leave us to suffer alone. COVID-19 forced Jesus out of the cathedral into the world, reminding Christians that church is not a building. Rather, church is wherever two or three are gathered—even if the “two” is only you and your cat—and where Jesus is present in bread that regular people bake, bless, and break at family tables and homemade altars. I did not liberate Jesus from the cathedral; a pandemic did. Jesus is with us. Here.

One day, the doors will open again. Many will not go back to church, mostly because they left some time ago. They did not need help to find Jesus in their lives and in the world. They were already discovering what it meant to follow Jesus beyond the church. Perhaps the pandemic hastened the process, caused them to ask new questions, or renewed their courage on the journey.

But many others will return. And, as before, people will sit close, hug and pass the peace, and share bread and wine. I suspect I will pray again at the altar in the National Cathedral, under the gaze of Jesus. I cannot predict what he might say. I do, however, know what I will say: “Thank you.”

Whatever happens, however, I hope none of us will ever forget the Jesus we have met in our own lives, who has been with us in fear and confusion and loss, in forced isolation and the surprising moments of joy, and through the ministrations of our shared human priesthood. It all matters. All of it.

Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence* (New York: Harper One, 2021), x, xv, 267–268.

Fr. Jack Schuler

