Imagine an autumn evening long ago, in the Holy City of Jerusalem:

It is still hot this time of year in Jerusalem. Not many people venture outside until the sun is low in the sky, and the cool Mediterranean breeze from the northwest begins to blow across the rooftops.

A few people begin to gather upstairs in one of the houses in the center of Jerusalem.

They find themselves in a big open room upstairs next to a wide veranda with a spectacular view of the Jerusalem skyline, and the streets below. All the windows are large and open letting the cool air in.

Jesus and his followers gather in this upstairs room for supper every evening.

They sit on the floor on rugs and pillows, and they share a simple meal of bread, cheese and olives, with a little wine mixed with water.

Tonight, someone brings a few cucumbers and dried fruit. Someone else – just arrived from the north – brings salted fish from their home region of Galilee and sounds of delight fill the room.

Jesus blesses this bounty, as he has done many times before, and he tells everyone that, come what may, he will always – always – be with them whenever they share a meal like this one.

This holy man, Jesus, from the north fascinates the people of Jerusalem. Every morning they find him teaching on the steps of the Temple, and then in the afternoon – in the hot blazing sun – he goes to the nearby pools to find the sick and the lame. They lay on the ground hoping someone will help them into the cool waters.

He quietly speaks to them, touches their foreheads, and every day someone walks away healed.

In the evenings, Jesus and his closest friends gather once again in this upstairs room overlooking the rooftops of Jerusalem, and they share another meal.

New people join them every night, and somehow there is always room at the table and food to share for everyone.

Some, though, stand outside on the veranda, fascinated but wary as they see and hear for themselves his radical hospitality. After all, Jesus is dining with tax collectors, and sinners. And not just men are welcome at his table, but women, too.
Night after night, Jesus breaks all of the social and religious taboos, and serves all who come through the door. He doesn’t care a hoot if his dinner guests are righteous or unrighteous, believers or non-believers, respectable or unrespectable.

He blesses and serves everyone.

On this particular evening, the religious authorities from the Temple are standing outside, and they grumble loud enough for Jesus to hear:

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them,” one of them huffs.

But rather than arguing, Jesus tells stories. Lots of stories about the Kingdom of God.

He tells about a woman who cleans her house from floor to ceiling to find one lost coin.

He tells about a shepherd who goes miles and miles to find one lost sheep.

He tells of how in God’s extravagant economy, no coin is too small, no seed too insignificant, and no sheep is too lost that it can’t be found.

Jesus is talking about more than lost sheep and missing coins. He describes the very reality of the Resurrection, and how God never gives up on us, even when we give up on ourselves.

In time, he will go to the Cross to show the way beyond the Cross – beyond death itself.

On this night, at this holy meal, Jesus tells how the Resurrection happens not just at the end of our mortal life but every single day.

He describes how new life can emerge from the worst moments of our life, how from the ashes we will rise.

Please allow me tell you about an experience of resurrection I witnessed first-hand, 18 years ago this past week, not long after the terrible events of Sept. 11, 2001.

You may or may not know this: There is an Episcopal Church one block from the World Trade Center in New York: St. Paul’s Chapel, built in 1766, the oldest building in continuous use in Manhattan.

When the towers crashed, they took with them nearly every building around them. But somehow St. Paul’s Chapel survived.

When the smoke cleared, the church and its graveyard were covered with ashes, debris and the pulverized remains of those who died in the towers.
In the days and weeks that followed, Episcopal clergy from all over the country gathered at St. Paul’s Chapel to do whatever we could. Lori and I went too.

When we arrived at St. Paul’s Chapel, the first thing we saw were make-shift shrines with photos of the missing, notes and flowers hung on the fence and left on the sidewalk.

Inside, St. Paul’s Chapel had become a respite center for the workers clearing away the rubble at Ground Zero – and painstakingly searching for human remains.

The narthex was stacked with palettes of water. Food was served in a corner.

In the nave – where you sit – firemen and cops and construction workers sat in the pews, or milled about, chatting quietly, taking a break from their grim work.

Some ate lunch, others took a nap in a pew. A few could be seen praying, others leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. Everyone seemed so very, very weary.

The sounds of machinery outside pounded relentlessly through the walls.

Yet the sights and sounds of hope also filled the air, bursting through the noise and rubble and ashes.

Banners and cards made by children from all over the country – and all over the world – hung on the walls and pews.

In this moment, I realized that St. Paul’s Chapel was a holy place for holy people, and it didn’t matter if they were Christians or Jews or Muslims or nothing at all.

And this is when I heard a quieter sound, a single voice, coming from the far end of the nave, from the old high altar.

A priest had begun saying words from the prayer book. It was noon, and time for the Holy Eucharist.

There was no interruption from all that was going on inside the chapel, or outside, even as the priest broke the bread and proclaimed “Alleluia, Christ is Risen!”

I thought back to the upper room in Jerusalem, long ago, and I remembered how Jesus promised always to be with us everywhere, no matter what.

In that moment, I knew the Resurrection is real.

From the ashes we will rise. AMEN