Back in the 1970s, the songwriting duo of Richard Avery and Donald Marsh wrote what would become part of the soundtrack of our lives. Dick was the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Port Jervis, New York, and Don was the director of music and fine arts. Don died on April 10th of this year at the age of 86. Their music was a staple at church camps and conferences and, bit-by-bit, made its way into the church’s hymnals and other songbooks.

One of the first songs we learned back then was “We Are the Church.” The words to the chorus went:
I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together.
All who follow Jesus, all around the world,
Yes we’re the church together.
The words to the first verse took us further:
The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,
The church is not a resting place, the church is the people.

As children and young people, it had never occurred to us that the church was the people. The colloquial phrase was, “We’re going to church” and that meant a place - a building. But this little song opened our eyes to see that the church was the people - that incredible cast of characters whose faces are forever etched into our memories.

Still, there is something about place. This living room/tabernacle/sanctuary is not what we associate with worship. I told my diminutive in-person congregation last Sunday that I feel a little like a funeral director. Once the service is over, I put everything back where it belongs and start getting ready for the next service.
Like you, I am missing the place we have shared on the corner of Mulberry and South East Second Street. I miss the choir and the organ and the music of our faith. I miss the stained glass. I miss the “oldness” of the sanctuary and the fellowship hall. I miss seeing you looking back at me, even when you do that through your eyelids.

I have been thinking about the power of place this week, especially as I have considered this passage from Acts that is before us this morning. Peter and John are going to the temple to pray. Also going to the temple is a small procession of people, carrying a man who had been lame since birth. It was their custom to bring him everyday to a place near the Beautiful Gate to beg for alms from those who passed by. In all honesty, we don’t know exactly where the Beautiful Gate stood, but its description, and the placement of the lame man, suggests that it was a place where those who were well-off would enter the temple environs.

Peter and John approach the gate and the lame man asks them for alms - just a little something to help him get through the day. The disciples - now apostles - respond to the man. Peter says, “I have not silver or gold, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus the Messiah of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” They helped the man stand and he took a few tentative steps, and the walked, and leapt, and danced his way into the temple, where people saw him, and recognized him, and the implication is that they couldn’t believe their eyes.

It would seem that there would be no better place for a healing to take place than in the temple. The temple was understood, in the most concrete terms, to be God’s house - where God was literally present. In the presence of God, you would expect healing to be commonplace. In the presence of God, there is no brokenness, nothing that is partial, nothing that is anything less than what God created it to be.

I have no question that the lame man did not expect to be healed. He was simply going to beg for a few coins with which to buy his daily bread. He could not have foreseen his life being completely refashioned.

But I have to wonder if Peter and John had any idea that they would be instruments of healing. Did they know they had the power to bring this man to wholeness? Did they have any idea that they would be used in this incredible way? Were they filled with confidence in extending healing to this man, or were there questions in their minds as to whether they had the power to affect such a change?

A funny thing happened on the way to the temple that day. The disciples discovered that God would use them. And a lame man discovered that God would gift him with wholeness and the ability to walk.

And a funny thing is happening on the way to being back together at the building on the corner of Mulberry Street and South East Second Street. We are making discoveries that we might not otherwise have recognized. We are seeing something that is changing the way we might see ourselves. We are identifying what is important and what might not be as important as we once thought.
Just this week, First Presbyterian Church was able to provide two meals at United Caring Shelter. Around 125 homeless women and men received hot and nourishing meals through your faithfulness and the ongoing work of our mission committee. One of those meals was given as a Ramadan gift by Amjad and Kristi Manna as a special act of kindness and charity during this holy month and delivered to the shelter by members of our congregation.

Just this week, the mission committee went into the funds entrusted to their care and designated $1,000 to be sent to the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program to provide relief to the people of Nashville, Tennessee, following the tornados and storms that ripped through their city.

Just this week, the mission committee recommended, and the Session approved, sending $2,000 from the mission endowment fund to the Covid 19 Community Fund that is being administered by United Way. This fund will assist people in Evansville and the surrounding area facing hardships during this time of self-isolation, unemployment, and financial stress.

Just this week, we received financial gifts from people who have joined us in our new, virtual congregation. Think about this. People who in all likelihood have never entered our building are moved to make a gift to our congregation’s life and ministry.

Just this week, we received a grant that will enable us to move all of our services and programs in the sanctuary to live-streaming. We will be installing cameras, a dedicated cable line and router, and all the things necessary to broadcast our services and concerts to anyone in the world with an internet connection.

Just this week, we were able to share the witness to the resurrection with two families who needed to hear that good news. In a time of isolation, grief is harder to bear than ever. But, representing you, I was able to conduct graveside funerals for the Norvell and Hight families and share the comfort and hope of our faith.

Just this week, Robert and I began conversations about what comes next - and there is plenty for what comes next!

A funny thing happened on the way to the temple - or to the church. We discovered that we don’t really need the building as much as we thought we did to do what God has called us to do in Jesus Christ. We have discovered that we can still feed the hungry, care for the homeless, extend compassion and assistance to those who are struggling, inspire participation in mission and ministry, expand our outreach, comfort those who grieve, and see news visions and dream new dreams.

I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together.
All who follow Jesus, all around the world,
Yes we’re the church together.
And we did all of that without the benefit and blessing of our building.
The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,
The church is not a resting place, the church is the people.
On the threshold of our bicentennial year, we are discovering in new and powerful ways that God is not done with us. God has amazing work to do through us. In this time of chaos and uncertainty, God is calling us to continue and expand our ministry. Who could have foreseen that?

And there is one more thing we need to say. Our building - our location - in the downtown is critical to our identity. While other congregations have fled to the suburbs and are beautifully gated in their presumed safety and security, our presence in the downtown puts us in touch with the needs of the poor, the abandoned, the forgotten, the hungry, the addicted, the abused, the victims of unjust policies and conditions, and with so many others who are more likely to live in more urban areas than in suburban areas. We are on that downtown corner for a reason. The option to leave was once before us. Wisely, our forebears chose to stay right where they were and where we are now. We may not have parking lots, family life centers, theatrical lighting and special effects, a massive staff, gymnasiums, or any of the things that some rely on. But what we have we give: “In the name of Jesus the Messiah of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

In the name of Jesus the Messiah, have a good meal.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, rebuild your neighborhood.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, have what you need during this crisis.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, join in our work.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, join us in reaching out.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, share the good news of hope and new life.
In the name of Jesus the Messiah, be the church.

The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,
The church is not a resting place, the church is the people.

A funny thing happened on the way to the temple. The disciples discovered their ministry.
A funny thing happened on the way back to the church. We rediscovered our ministry, our mission, and our calling.
Thanks be to God. For now and evermore. Amen.