

Ten Years of Shared Ministry
The Second Sunday of Easter, March 29, 2008
Text: John 20:19-31

A little over ten years ago, when I was interviewing for the position of rector here, someone on the Search Committee asked me “how long do you preach?” I responded a bit flippantly: “well, as long as it takes.” They politely chuckled and then someone said, “no really...how long do you preach?” So, I gave it another shot, and said:

Well, I have heard forty-minute sermons that I didn’t want to ever end, and four-minute homilies that were three and a half minutes too long. So it is hard to say, because different texts and different occasions invite different kinds of sermons.

Dead silence. And then, “how long do you preach?” By now I figured if I was going to have any chance at all of being offered this job I’d better answer the question, so I said, “well, I guess about fifteen or twenty minutes.”

Now I don’t know if anyone else on the Search Committee remembers that exchange and if they do I’m not certain they will remember it in exactly the same way. Memories are like that. But that is how I remember it.

Not too long after that, Hathy and the boys and I snuck into a Saturday night service in November 1997; it was All Saints’ weekend. We drove up from Westport, CT in the rain; Graham was seven and James was a clingy three-year old attached to his mother’s hip. We intentionally arrived a few minutes late and left a few minutes early, trying to be as anonymous as possible. But it was pretty obvious, I think, to everyone who was in church that night exactly who we were. After the service we headed to Val’s to de-brief.

I listened to a forty- minute sermon that night by the interim (which was about thirty-nine and a half minutes too long) and it dawned on me that this was the context in which I’d been asked that question about how long I preached. It was and remains a valuable lesson in pastoral ministry to realize that questions almost always arise in a context, and it helps if you can figure out what’s behind the question that is being asked because sometimes that’s where the real energy is.

There are many things that go into a search process and a lot of them are stressful—for both sides. It’s an imperfect process. For Hathy and me it wasn’t only about *my* sense of call to be rector of a parish but of finding a place where she could pursue her vocation as well, and most of all finding a place that all four of us would be able to call home. As with any of you who try to discern where God may be leading you when a new job opportunity presents itself, you try to imagine yourself in the aisles of the grocery store, or your kids in the schools, or most importantly the kind of friends you will make. And you can’t know for sure until you get down the road a decade or so and look back on it all whether or not you made the right decision. But it does seem from where I now stand that we got it right.

As I look back on that night and on the past ten years here, my heart is glad. Whatever else I may say tonight I hope you will hear this: thank you. Thanks for this celebration, but even more than

that, thanks for opening your hearts to me and my family and for welcoming us into yours. Thanks to Gordon and Rebecca for being among us tonight, and to Mark Hatch and Darrell Huddleston and Audrey Cronin, friends in Christ and colleagues in ministry. Thanks to all of the staff here, past and present, who see their work for what it is: ministry. To the wardens especially, with whom I have been privileged to share leadership in this place over the past ten years, I want to say thanks. They are each incredibly gifted and faithful and all of them have taught me way more about God and God's people than I have taught them. They planned this celebration tonight and are named in the bulletin but I would be remiss if I didn't also mention Jeanne Schutte, who has since joined the saints triumphant and Laura Caswell, the newest member of this august group. (And I'm happy to announce that Laura has agreed to chair the twentieth celebration!)

I hope that you will take these bulletins home with you tonight and at some point that you will sit and pray the prayer of Archbishop Romero that can be found on the back of tonight's bulletin. Many of you already know it. Archbishop Romero was martyred when I was a senior in high school. One of the Jesuit priests I had as a teacher in college introduced me to liberation theology and it was one of the steps along the way in my understanding of a call to ordained ministry, so I have known for a long time about what the Church has been up to in Central America. But this prayer didn't become known to me until Mary Lindfors graduated from the Parish Nurse Program over at Ana Maria College and I found it on the cover of the bulletin at her graduation. It took on new meaning this past year when a group from St. Francis traveled to El Salvador and when this parish agreed to tithe the giving for our Capital Campaign to the work Crystosal is doing there. As Archbishop Romero said, *it does indeed help, now and then, to step back and take the long view*. For me this night and the sabbatical I will embark on next week are about doing just that.

He goes on to say: *we plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise*. That rings true for me, not just among the poor in El Salvador but in the suburbs of Massachusetts as well. Some days it can feel rather insignificant, but over time you begin to see some of those seeds growing and that is incredibly rewarding. It's like seeing those boys I baptized ten years ago, who will present the bread and the wine tonight when we celebrate the Eucharist. We made promises to them and their families when they were baptized and week by week we live out those promises, with God's help, as we see them being raised into the full stature of Christ. It is truly holy work. As we pause tonight to look back, I hope that you feel with me not so much nostalgia for the past as hope for the future.

The parable of the mustard seed has always been one of my favorites and when I came across the artwork found on the cover of your bulletin tonight I immediately saved it to my computer, so that every time I turn it on to work on a sermon or read an email from a parishioner I see it. It has become a kind of icon for me, a reminder that seeds really do grow, and that the Kingdom of God really is in our midst. We can become so preoccupied that we miss it. But along the way, by God's grace, lives are transformed and friendships deepen and old grudges are set aside. Tonight's collect seems fitting for an occasion like this: through the Paschal mystery God has established the new covenant of reconciliation. Words are cheap and there is a lot of talk in the church these days about reconciliation but I've been here long enough to know that it isn't just a pious platitude. We are intentional about that here; which doesn't mean we are always successful

at it but it does feel to me as if this call to be ambassadors of reconciliation is taken seriously here, and is woven into the fabric of this parish community.

Nevertheless, we live our lives in between: in-between the Kingdom that is present but not fully realized, in between those seeds in the ground and the beautiful mustard tree to which the birds of the air fly, in between the daring proclamation that Christ is risen and the yearning for Christ to come again, in between our call to be instruments of peace and peace on earth. Tonight we stand in that “in between” place, celebrating what we have done but also fully aware that God isn’t finished with us yet.

One of the reasons I am so proud to be an Episcopalian is that there are, as far as I can tell, way too many Christian options out there that are afraid of the really big questions—or even of the relatively small questions. It is tempting in unsettling times to want to find answers that seem settled. This brings me to good old “doubting Thomas.” One of the unfortunate consequences of the Enlightenment is that we mistakenly think that what we *believe* is the same as having faith. So the wider church continues to fight old battles about the virgin birth or why Jesus died or what happens at the Eucharist or about how to interpret Scripture or about who can get married in the church, and then mistakenly we insist that our *beliefs* are what make us Christians. I submit to you that we have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Jesus didn’t say as he washed his disciples’ feet that the world would know us by our right belief. He gave us a *new commandment*; he told us to love one another and he insisted that the world would know we are Christians by our willingness to be servants in a world bent on abusing power. St. Paul told the Christians in Corinth that what makes us Christians is faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love. Paul said that we can have all kinds of gifts or knowledge or orthodox theology but if we don’t have love we are clanging cymbals.

Tonight’s encounter between Thomas and Jesus becomes clearer when we learn just a little bit of Greek. *Pistis* is not talking about the *content* of our faith; it’s not about what we think we know. It’s about something much more primal; it’s about trust. Where do we put our trust? So a better translation of the words we heard Jesus saying to Thomas in tonight’s gospel would be: “do not lack trust; trust.” Thomas isn’t struggling with his doctrine of the resurrection. He’s struggling with whether his trust in Jesus was a good decision now that Jesus has been killed by the Roman authorities. He had chosen to stake his life on Jesus—to follow him wherever it might lead. But it led to death on a cross. So behind the questions he is articulating, what he’s really wrestling with is trust—and we shouldn’t be surprised that Jesus fully appreciates the question behind the question.

We’ve heard from Thomas on two previous occasions in John’s Gospel. In the eleventh chapter, when Jesus goes back to Judea to raise Lazarus (even though it is clear at that point that the authorities are out to get him) Thomas is the one who says to the other disciples: “let us go with him that we may also die with him.” (John 11:16) He is willing to follow Jesus to death; to stand in solidarity with him. But the question before us tonight is a harder one: is he willing to risk life in Christ?

And then one of my favorite Thomas moments, when Jesus is waxing poetic about how the disciples should not let their hearts be troubled. He is going to prepare a place for them and in God’s house there are many dwelling places. And then Jesus says: “you know the way where I am going.” It’s like men and directions: Jesus says “you know the way” and everyone is

nodding, oh yeah, we know the way, we don't need no stinking MapQuest! And good old Thomas finally speaks up and asks the question that all the disciples are thinking but are too afraid to ask: "excuse me Lord but we don't have a clue where you are going; how can we know the way?" (John 14:5) It is in that specific context—to *those* disciples (and to us) that Jesus says: trust me. *I am the way, the truth, the life.* Keep your eyes on me, stay with me and I'll get you where you need to go.

So Thomas the twin (at least as he is remembered in the Fourth Gospel) isn't afraid to ask the hard questions. He's isn't afraid to articulate where he is and what he needs to overcome his fear and to regain trust. That leads him to renewed trust and he courage to claim: "My Lord and My God."

Over the past ten years I've noticed as pastor of this congregation that many of the people who have found their way into this parish community have expressed gratitude that the Episcopal Church is a place where all are welcome and where it's alright to be like Thomas. Maybe it's even encouraged. Whether it's at a Palm Saturday event, or a Rite 13 class, or as the youth group gathers with their candles illuminating the darkness of this church, or in an EfM class or a Bible study or a staff meeting or a vestry meeting there is always room for "Thomas" at the table. We do live in an unsteady and confusing world. In times like these, cookie-cutter spirituality and cheap grace abound. But we aspire for something more than that.

Maybe our gift as a parish and as a denomination is not in providing ready-made answers to life's questions, but in creating a safe space where the questions can be articulated, until we find our way to the One who truly is worthy of our trust. When we can allow one another space that is big enough for our doubts and uncertainties, trust can be cultivated and nurtured like a tiny little mustard seed. It may not seem like much at first but when it's watered and nurtured and cared for, with God's help, it grows. It bears fruit. Every time that happens we get a little glimpse of that mustard tree coming into all of its glory.

We have had our fair share of challenges over the past ten years. And no doubt there will be new challenges for us to face. But we are learning (with God's help) to face them together. We are learning what it means to be Church in these dangerous times. And I feel like we are in a better place, a stronger place for all of it. And so while I am totally aware that the Kingdom of God isn't fully here yet, and that it does always lie beyond our vision, I also know that every now and again we really do get glimpses of it. And those glimpses sustain us for the journey.

For me tonight is most definitely one of those occasions. And so I conclude where I began: thank you for the opportunity to share this ministry with you. While we have come a ways together, I truly look forward the adventures that lie ahead.