

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Sermon  
April 11, 2010 The Second Sunday of Easter  
The Welcoming and Seating of the Right Reverend Michael Hanley  
Tenth Bishop of Oregon  
The Very Reverend William Lupfer

The nickname for today, in the church calendar is..."Low Sunday." Not much "low" about today, is there? (laughter) But I will make the assumption that you all are the true believers, because you are here right after Easter. And you are here to honor our new bishop, and to make sure that he has a place to sit, and rest. So we're going to go deep into the Gospels now, together, because you all go deep in your life...I know that.

I'm thinking of Elaine Pagels, who wrote the book, Beyond Belief. Elaine is a scholar who is alive today, and she was thrilled...as many were, when we discovered somewhere in the Middle East...the Gospel of Thomas. It's an ancient text, attributed to Thomas, that has a slightly different take on Jesus...and on faith...than the four Gospels that we know through Scripture. As Elaine Pagels has read the Gospel of Thomas, she thinks she sees kind of a "family feud." She thinks she sees John, upset at Thomas. It's interesting, as she unpacks this. In the three Synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke...Thomas is only mentioned in a list. It's only in John, that Thomas gets some "showtime." And he looks like a "Dufus," every time John talks about him! (laughter) So Elaine says: "Aha...I think I see a fault line." Think about Thomas in the Gospel of John...when Lazarus is dying...and the disciples want to go there. Thomas says something really stupid. He says: "Well, maybe we should go too, and die with him." John lets you know this Thomas is a real knucklehead. Or...when Jesus says: "Don't worry...I go to my Father's house...and prepare a place for you...and you know where it is..." And Thomas says: "I don't know where it is!" Or again today...finally...Thomas, who insists he wants to see Jesus...Jesus comes up, and Thomas is the knucklehead! Elaine Pagels is clear. John does not like Thomas. Because the Gospel of Thomas is all about knowing God, by knowing yourself. And the Gospel of John is all about knowing God, by following Jesus.

Now we here today, can say...faith has both of those aspects: following God by going into our own heart's desire, and following God by following Jesus. Both of those are key for us! We don't have to get in that family feud. Thomas can be someone who gives us the courage to ask the tough difficult questions. And you all know someone like that, don't you? That kind of situation you're in...it's kind of uncomfortable...and you're hoping no one talks about it. And then there's a Thomas there, who says what others are wondering, and names it. Do you have someone like this in your life? Someone who kind of annoys you...but brings you to your better self? It's interesting...I know you all do - because I'm in your life. (laughter) We try to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable... But you know this kind of person, right? You can probably imagine someone. For me, one is my older sister, Libby. I love her dearly, but she's a bit like that sand under the skin...that keeps me moving to my better self. Says things that I'd rather forget about...have no one recognize...and she names it.

I think the fascinating aspect of that kind of “Thomas” in our life, is that that’s the person who often stays with us to the end. That’s the person who sees our better side, when we cannot see it ourselves. That irascible type...stays with us. And so, in the good times, we’re kind of annoyed. But in the bad times, that person becomes our rock. And I say...Thomas was a rock for Jesus...and for the disciples. In the Gospel of John, Thomas is the first one to recognize Jesus as Lord...and to call him that. This kind of love that Thomas shows for Jesus, would be technically called erotic love. Not sexual, but erotic. Erotic love is the kind of love that goes towards someone we love. And that was Thomas. He loved Jesus so much, he wasn’t going to “settle.” He wanted to see!

It’s also interesting with Thomas...all the disciples were gathered in the room...because they were afraid. You get this sense that they were huddling and hiding there. But Thomas was the only one who wasn’t! So we can extrapolate that he was the one who had less fear. They probably sent him out for food when Jesus came the first time. You can just imagine...“You go.” “No, you go.” “I’ll go,” says Thomas. And he goes! That person who loves you so much...they will risk your anger, to draw you to your better side. And then we say, when we go to that side...there we meet God. Because we are wired in our own heart’s desire, to desire God. And so when we hitch our soul to our deepest heart’s desire...we travel to God. And that’s an open place to find God. Thomas is one who brings that out for us.

But John also shows us the way to Jesus. Remember, John is the disciple whom Jesus loved. Throughout his Gospel...“I’m the favorite!” And then he tells a story a little more, and...“I’m the favorite!” We know someone like that...who loves you so much, they want to be your “favorite.” One time, my wife and I were with some friends...before we had children. And they had a small daughter. And Mai...that’s her name, Mai Chong...she’s 25 now, but she was a little girl. We were playing 18 holes of golf, and she loved to play on the golf cart. And every so often, she’d say: “Bill!” And I’d say, “Yes, Mai?” She’d say: “Hi...” (laughter) Then we would play a little more, and she’d say: “Bill!” “Yes, Mai?” “Hi!...” That’s how John would have us approach Jesus. “I wanna’ be his favorite...I love him.” That’s an erotic love too...a love that goes right to Jesus. That’s the side of ourselves that’s caught by this incredible man from Galilee...Jesus the Christ, whom we follow.

Today, the Scripture through John’s sort of clumsy telling of Thomas’ clumsiness...the Scripture calls us to fill out both sides of our soul...the side that trusts our own self - our own heart’s desire...and to practice our life, so that our desire is geared towards God, and not turned and twisted. But to also embrace that side that openly loves Jesus...that doesn’t seek to admire Jesus...but seeks to follow Jesus.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1806-1882) said: “If you are an admirer of Jesus, you are not a follower.” Admiration puts too much distance. I admire Sir Winston Churchill. But I don’t follow him. I admire him when I can sit in my chair and read about him...his political brilliance. But he doesn’t help me, in times of trouble. If we put Jesus in that admiration box--only, we’ll never follow him. He’ll be too distant. No...we need to become like Thomas...or like John...both clumsy disciples...who were

secure enough in their love with Jesus, that they were comfortable being sort of stupid and awkward. To go to that place in our own souls...that we can be there too.

Now this Scripture comes to us on a very important day, for us here at this Cathedral, for us in this diocese, and for our dear Bishop, who is one-day-old, and counting... We welcome Michael here, and some of us have been in discernment for a long time about your gifts as bishop, and about how you will be with us here. And we see that balance, that is coming to us from the Gospel today: the confidence you have in yourself, to claim yourself and be yourself...and not try to be all things to all people. Which, believe me...the siren song for a bishop is just that. And we'll be singing it here too, if we're honest. But then the other side...to be so rooted in your faith...to demonstrate that over the decades of your life and of your ministry. So it's a deep privilege for us, to be here and be people of hospitality for you. Because you have a hard job. A lot of us project glory and power on you, but you know already there's a tough side to your job.

So one of the ministries we have here at the Cathedral is a ministry of hospitality...to guard both sides of that faith, and to maybe sometimes be irascible...and we've got great people for that side here...(laughter),...to be that kind of burr in the saddle, when necessary. But also be that companion that walks with. And so we look forward to the seasons of ministry ahead with you. We are thrilled that you're here. We are thrilled that you're here, and we look forward to following Jesus with you.

My prayer for you all here, is that as we walk this journey together with Michael, that you will open your hearts more than you have before, that you will stretch both sides of your soul. The side that needs to claim yourself completely, and the side that needs to run to Jesus, and throw yourself upon him. Open your soul, then you will be able to offer hospitality...to our bishop, and to any other person who comes into this congregation.