

Easter 5 Year A
May 18, 2014

This has been a great, and important, week in the All Saints journey toward the calling of a new rector for this community. As you perhaps noticed in this week's electronic, the Discernment Committee has whittled its original list of 22 candidates down to a much shorter list of 6 names. The next step will be for members of the Discernment Committee to visit each of those six candidates in their home congregations, before reducing that number to a short list of finalists to pass forward to the vestry later this summer to consider for election. So I especially encourage you to keep the Discernment Committee members, along with those six candidates remaining, close in your prayers as we move through this next step of this process.

Of course, this discernment work we are all involved in here is also necessarily being paralleled by another discernment process at the same time. Just as All Saints is figuring out what is the next chapter in its story, I am doing the same thing in my own personal and professional life as well. So, while the Discernment Committee spent some of its time this week doing its work, I spent some time this week doing my own – part of which meant talking with folks at the Church Pension Fund about various options I might have in front of me following my time at All Saints. You see, in addition to working with folks post-retirement, the Church Pension Fund also provides assistance and counsel in getting from “here” to “there”.

I know that many of you have had similar conversations with your own financial advisors – and some of you are the very advisors that others seek out to

do this work... but I've got to tell you... I often leave those conversations feeling worse than when I came in. Despite all of the fancy retirement-income calculators, and the rosy projections about income vs. expenses in the years ahead, it always ends up looking like I'm going to have to work until I'm about 95 before I'll be able to enjoy my "golden years" in a style to which I would like to become accustomed.

I suppose in my line of work, it's generally assumed that the real perks of the job aren't going to be revealed on this side of that thin line between life and death anyway. You've probably heard the old saying about clergy salaries: "The pay's not all that great... but the fringe benefits are out of this world." There is that popular notion within the church that somehow all of us are supposed to be content with our lot in life – whatever lot that may be – with the assurance that whatever awaits us in the great beyond will far exceed anything we might imagine in this life. We all hope to go off to our "great reward"... where the streets are lined with gold, and the air is always crisp and clear, and the unending supply of ice-cream sundaes are always calorie-free.

Imagining life beyond this life has been the work of poets and pundits and preachers for as long as there have been poets and pundits and preachers to ponder such things. And certainly, within the Christian tradition, today's gospel reading is a text rich with pondering possibilities. Today's passage contains some of Jesus' most familiar and comforting words... sayings like, "Do not let your hearts be troubled"... "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places"... I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

But for me, the words in this passage which always jump out most vividly don't come out of the mouth of Jesus at all, but rather out of the mouth of one of my greatest heroes in the New Testament. It's our old friend, the apostle Thomas. Thomas is so utterly human, that his words always challenge me in a way that few others do in the entire Bible. Thomas, you see, is the one person in all the scriptures who seems to say out loud what all of the rest of us think all the time, but would never dare to utter.

It was Thomas, who, upon hearing of the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus, and wanting to impress Jesus, cried out in his youthful exuberance, "Let's all go, so that we may die with him." And it was Thomas, who, after missing out on the resurrection appearance of Jesus on Easter evening, declared, "I won't believe it unless I put my finger in his wounds." And then, of course, it was the same Thomas who encountered the risen Christ a week later, and who professed his faith with those memorable words, "My Lord, and my God."

Well, today, our dear friend, Thomas, is once again the central actor in our gospel drama. As usual, Thomas seems a little confused, a little out of touch with whatever it is that Jesus is trying to communicate to the disciples. And so, when Jesus says those classic words which we have heard in countless funeral services, "In my Father's house are many dwelling places, and I go to prepare a place for you," it is Thomas who speaks up for all of us in our uncertainty. Jesus says, "You know the way." And Thomas replies, "We don't even know where you're going. How can we know the way?" Only Thomas has the courage to say what all of the disciples – and surely all of us as well – silently fear in our hearts... that sometimes we don't have the faintest idea of what God is up to, or where God might be leading us.

It's not a comfortable place to be. It's no fun finding ourselves in that situation where we have no control over ourselves or the world around us. In fact, it's more than just "no fun." It's downright unnerving. How many times have each of us, in our own way said the same thing as Thomas: "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"

Thomas is, to me, the perfect example of the effectiveness of programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. Many of you are familiar with their 12 Step approach to life. Since it was founded back in 1935, Alcoholics Anonymous (or A.A. as it is more familiarly known) has helped millions of men and women get their lives back again, after having lost them to the ravages of alcohol. It's all about gaining control and power in life – but the first of those 12 steps to recovery is where everybody has to begin. Step 1 says, "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable." The first step to gaining power, paradoxically, is admitting our powerlessness. In the same way, the first step toward following God is admitting with Thomas, "Lord, we don't know where you are going."

We all long, somehow, for that room set aside especially for us in God's mansion... if only we could figure out how to get there. This year is the 50th anniversary of the film adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's classic tale, *Pygmalion*. Of course, most of us know it by the title given in the musical rendition, *My Fair Lady*... and especially the movie version starring Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn. Early on in the story, Hepburn's character, Eliza Doolittle, the Cockney street flower merchant, dreams of a better life, dreams of becoming a lady, dreams of having a place to call home. She sings:

*All I want is a room somewhere,
Far away from the cold night air,
With one enormous chair.
Oh, wouldn't it be lovely.*

With Eliza, and with Thomas, we all want that room... if only we could figure out how to get there.

Well, allow me, if you will, to let you in on one of the great secrets of life that I have discovered. And the secret is this: You don't have to wait until you're dead to get that room in God's mansion. God's promise is not just some eternal reward which awaits us when our time's up on this plane. God's promise is eternal life... starting right at this moment, right here and right now.

Eliza Doolittle sang: "All I want is a room somewhere." But, truth be told, everybody already has that room somewhere – be it an actual room in your home, or your favorite stretch of beach along the coast, or some tree-lined meadow somewhere high up in the Sierras, or perhaps that quiet place to which you can go simply by closing your eyes and steadying your breathing and placing yourself in the nearer presence of the Holy... everybody has that place – maybe "out there" somewhere, or maybe deep "within here" (in the heart) somewhere – a place where God already resides. It is that place where you can truly be one with God; that place where you are safe and secure and confident in God's goodness and grace in your life; that place where you can be everything in God's eyes that you are meant to be. That is the gift which God has given each of us.

I first met her in a hospital room while her husband lay dying of lung cancer. He was the Episcopalian in the family. She attended a different church in town. After almost 40 years together, it had come down to this. I must say, it was one of the most difficult hospital visits I've ever made in my life. As she looked at her husband lying there, struggling for each breath... and as she looked back over her own life... the only words she could muster were, "It's so unfair." It was so unfair, she told me, because she had sacrificed so much... because she had done without so often... because she had set aside her hopes and dreams over and over again... all because she was convinced that God would somehow love her more if she did.

One of the saddest things I've ever experienced is watching people who have made the decision to give us so much... so much joy, so much possibility, so much opportunity... thinking that, if they can just sacrifice enough in this life, God will somehow make up for it in the next life. Meanwhile, life just kind of passes them by while they're biding their time waiting for something else to happen. I've probably said it before, but the real question which marks the human experience is not: "Is there life after death?" The real question is: "Is there life after birth?"

Jesus' promise to Thomas was not just an eternal reward in the sweet by-and-by. Jesus' gift was immediate: "I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life." And that is Jesus' promise to us as well. Live your life today not as though it's just a precursor to the next life. Live your life today as though this is the most important day of your life, as though this is the greatest gift which you might receive, as though nothing matters more in God's eyes than this moment. God isn't waiting to join you on the other side. God is waiting to join you right now. *Carpe diem*. Seize the day. Seize the moment. Seize the opportunity. Seize life. Amen.