



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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BLUE CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 20, 2018

HABAKKUK 2:1-4; PSALM 126; HEBREWS 10:35-11:1; JOHN 20:24-29

GROUNDING IN GOD'S LOVE

JOHN 20:24-27 *[Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with the other disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."]

I was reading poems by Mary Oliver recently, many of them from the year after the death of her lifelong partner, Molly. In one poem, she imagines her grief as a lonely walk on a dusty road with a heart-load of pain. In another, her sorrow feels like land used up and barren while spring blossoms elsewhere. In a third, she marvels at how birds can open their wings so

easily and fly, when she seems to have forgotten her own way.

These poems remind me that grief and loneliness and longing for love are ever-present -- they are an inescapable part of our journey through life. But it's not the same for everyone. The events that bring each of us to sorrow and how we journey through it are unique to each person. It's a paradox -

- we are connected to each other and also isolated at the same time.

So, it is good you are here. Our service tonight is meant to create some space for quiet and peace for those whose experience of Christmas is difficult or painful. For people who know the sorrow that feels like land used up and barren. Some might be grieving the deaths of loved ones or the end of important relationships. Others might be grappling with the loss of health or happier times. For some, preparation for Christmas brings a general sadness that is hard to pin down. We remember the Christmases of our childhood, and that stirs up vulnerability and anxiety for the future. Not to mention that time of year, as the days grow shorter and the nights longer, our energy flags. So, if any of this sounds familiar to you, please know you are in the right place. You are welcome here.

It's our tradition in the Episcopal church to remember a holy woman or man each day of the year. Tonight, our scripture readings come from the feast

of the apostle Thomas, which is tomorrow, December 21, also the winter solstice and the longest night of the year. That seems apt to me, because Thomas found himself in darkness after Jesus' death and struggled mightily to find the solid ground of hope. He was on that lonely walk on a dusty road with a heart-load of pain. So, when his friends tell him, "We have seen the Lord," he says, "I cannot believe unless I see for myself. I must put my finger on the mark of the nails in his hands and put my hand in his side." Thomas needs something tangible to regain hope.

And a week later, it comes. Jesus appears to Thomas and the others. "Peace be with you," he says. "Thomas, put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt." Thomas does, and everything changes. "My Lord and my God!" he exclaims. It is the most powerful expression of Jesus' identity in the Bible. Jesus is real and Thomas' trust and hope return.

Some call this story the one about “Doubting Thomas,” but that really misses the point. Thomas is no different from all the other disciples, who didn’t believe Mary when she returned from Jesus’ tomb to say he was risen. They were frightened, too, and locked themselves away.¹ This story isn’t about Thomas’ doubt and skepticism, but about Jesus’ abundant love and generosity that meets Thomas exactly where he is and offers what he needs, point by point, to move out of despair and into faith.

And as always, what Jesus does reveal the truth about God. The One who created us in love, who designed us to carry the same holy likeness and image, does not desire for us to be broken by the burdens of life -- no matter how heavy the grief or loneliness or disappointment.

St. Paul wrote, “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor

anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.” This Love has the power to bring new life out of loss and sorrow. It is stronger than the grave and offers light in times of darkness. This Love dwells in you and in me.

So, as you make your way through the Christmas season, please know you are not alone. Here are three ways to stay grounded in God’s love:

- Practice compassion for yourself. Tell the truth about how you are doing and take care of your body’s needs for sleep, good food, fresh air.
- Connect with people you care for and trust, even for a brief time. There are places where showing up just as you are is a gift. Not only here at Saint Mark’s, but at Noel House, Mary’s Place, or St. Luke’s Kitchen.

¹ *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 1949.

- Practice gratitude for simple things. When you wake up in the morning, give thanks for the possibilities of a new day. Before you go to bed at night, light a candle and give thanks for its glow.

Tonight we remember that the Holy One who created us, who loves us, and

who shares our humanity, does not judge our doubts and sorrow, but comes with compassion and comfort, inviting us to draw near. The promise of Christmas is light in the darkness, the knowledge that eventually, birds' wings do open and they fly.

Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!