



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE  
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 24, 2022  
ACTS 5:27-32; PSALM 150; REVELATION 1:4-8; JOHN 20:19-31

## WE GATHER TO TOUCH AND TO KNOW, WE GATHER TO BE TRANSFORMED SO THAT WE MIGHT TRANSFORM

**John 20:19-31** [When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them 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." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.]

Holy Week, 2022. My first Holy Week as part of the community here at Saint Mark's, and it certainly made a substantial impact on me. It

was a full and emotional liturgical week-long journey, one which enveloped me in our expressions of grief and glory that are given

form by our liturgical tradition, and it also brought me close to a team of people who were all working hard to support the worship of this cathedral community. It was a new, and a different experience for me. Although I have no doubt each and every member of staff and each and every volunteer was tired out and overstretched, I felt, and have come to know the outpouring of love and joy that is very real in this community – I felt, the tangible and embodied delight of being able to work and worship alongside the people of this place, and I felt the embrace of inclusion and support as I navigated my own new role. And having felt all that, I now know and believe something of Christian community, it's value and its potential.

Holy Week, the most sacred week of the year for Christians all over the world, it draws us, as a global community, into the final days of Jesus's life, his suffering, crucifixion, his death... before the glorious and triumphant celebration of his resurrection with the proclamation of Easter!

And, this year, after two years of our liturgies impacted by the pandemic, *we gathered*, to journey together through Holy Week, from Jerusalem to the cross, to the empty tomb, and on to the locked house where the disciples met. Through our shared grief to

that collective joy. And *I felt* all that with you this year.

When I was discerning my call to the priesthood my primary wobble, my primary resistance, was a fear that I would no longer experience encounter with God, particularly in the Eucharist, in the same way as a worship leader, as I had been able to experience it as a faithful member of the congregation. I'm lucky to have been surrounded by enough experienced clergy people that I was reassured, and encouraged to trust that a different, yes, but equally powerful encounter lay within ordained ministry. They were right. But this wasn't just a shift in the quality of my spiritual experience, this was a shift to a far fuller understanding of what our worship time together *is*...

Why do we do all this, why do we gather? Why is all this important? When I think back to my own concerns during my discernment, I realize how focused I was on my own personal experience, my own inner life, there was so much I still had to understand about what we do here, together, when we gather each week. As a true product of my time and place, I realize I was making my own experience primary – how does this feel for me? How might it feel different if my role were to change? What if I don't like it as much? What if, dare I admit it, what if it's just

not as spiritually satisfying? Do I want to risk the comfort and quality of my spiritual life taking a hit?

Shaped by a culture of individualism, that's thoroughly blended with a lifestyle centered on consumerism and the primary importance of subjective reality, I had lost sight – or perhaps I had never fully grasped – the reason why Eucharist is, for us, the principal act of Christian worship. My individualism prioritized my own personal experience of worship, almost to the exclusion of the corporate or community significance of our gathering, *of church*.

Scholars tell us that the early church gathered not only as a worshipping community, but as a community of citizens organizing and becoming an *alternative society*. These early Christians gathered around a meal, participating in that most basic of life-giving activities, they ate together.

They gathered, in love and committed community, around a table to be the real, physical, embodied reality of God's *kingdom reality*, to represent, by their gathering, the reign of God on earth as it is, and as it is still to be.

I imagine these gatherings were sometimes joyful, and at other times hard, or even kinda flat sometimes, or mundane. Sometimes harmonious, other time rife with conflict. I

imagine some of those gathered were at times exhausted and might have preferred to have been somewhere else. Sometimes folks might have been distracted by the important tasks they'd set aside so they could show up, sometimes the early Christians might have felt weary explaining or defending who they were and what they believed. But enough of them continued to gather. They gathered, they connected, and *they* laid the foundation for what we do here every Sunday.

They prioritized the way of living that Jesus mandated, that we love one another as he loves us, and this all took place, at first, around a table, with the sharing of a meal.

What once I just didn't quite realize, was that all this isn't primarily about my *own* spiritual experience, my own personal, spiritual gratification, if you like, within worship, with God; instead, what's asked of me as a member of God's church is my embodied participation in the kingdom of God, that's inaugurated by the risen Jesus: a new way of living, of doing this life, a new way of being society, world. Committed, gathered, together, as Christ's body, a force of love! A new world, God's Kingdom, both already here, and still not quite yet arrived. We gather here as if this kingdom reality is our reality, and we also gather to practice that reality that is still yet to come.

The Rev Dr Juan Oliver<sup>i</sup>, who's the current Custodian of the Book of Common Prayer (so he knows a thing or two about liturgy!) lays this all out beautifully, and simply, he says,

“We imagine and present this vision of how the kingdom will be through the way we enact its ritual building blocks: how we gather, proclaim and listen, how we respond, pray, present offerings, give thanks, eat together, *and* go out in mission... *How* we do all this is how we envision the kingdom.”

In the gospel reading today we hear of Thomas' bold and courageous encounter with the risen Jesus, his enquiring and seeking encounter with Jesus' risen body, to touch so that he might come to really know. And in being so brave as to ask to touch, to feel Jesus' wounds to know that the one that stood before him was indeed the risen Jesus, Thomas gives expression to the Christian truth that *this* is about this life, this physical life, this embodied life... transformed. Spiritual experiences are an aspect of life, certainly, but it is the stuff of our physical,

touchable, tangible reality that we are called to ground ourselves in. I have certainly had moments where I've gotten lost, adrift and detached caught up in my own spiritual experience, or spiritual longing. Again, the Rev Dr Juan Oliver succinctly warns of the temptation to *over-emphasize* the inner spiritual life, as this can quickly lead to the diminished importance of the full embodied self, he says,

“By ignoring the physicality of Christ and his Body, we can also easily ignore the suffering bodies of humanity and the rest of creation in the service of either ideas or feelings or both.”

We gather here together in this place to touch and to know the transformed and risen body of Jesus. We gather here each week *to be* the transformed and risen body of Jesus.

We gather here together as an alternative society, one that respects the dignity of every human being, and that strives for justice and peace among all people. We come here so we might show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith – we come here to touch and to know, to be transformed and to transform.

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<sup>i</sup> With gratitude for the work of Juan M C Oliver, *The banquet of the kingdom*, Anglican Theological Review 2022 Vol. 104(1), 22-36.