

A Sermon Delivered by
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Glenside, Pennsylvania

Easter I
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Dear Lord, you have held us in your hand and lighted our path during our journey. We give thanks for your guidance and ask that you be with us as our new journey begins; and we ask you bless Emily and the people of St. Stephen's as they begin their new journeys. This we pray through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Then he said to Thomas, "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."

Today's Gospel story speaks to me of belief and faith and transformation; perhaps it's the end of one journey for the disciples and the beginning of a new one...

Today I will try to tell a story, a story of a journey, a journey of hope and faith and transformation, a journey ending today...with a new journey beginning today.

Fourteen months ago, the DC met for the first time. We were called by the vestry to discern the needs and dreams of St. Peter's and discern God's plan for St. Peter's and our next rector.

We were called by you into holy discernment with the expectation of taking on this holy discernment and presenting a worldly recommendation to the vestry...one who would be called to a new ministry...that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for us and equip us for our ministries.

So there we were sitting around looking at each other with that "deer-in-the-headlight-eyes". OK, what are we going to do now? How are we going to do this and what are we going to do with this awesome responsibility? I think there was a bit of Thomas in each of us that day.

Long ago, the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu spoke the familiar words, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Thus began a journey for the DC and the people of St. Peter’s...

From the beginning we were committed to a prayerful approach to our journey. Our main reference was a book called *Calling Clergy* by Elizabeth Geitz. She writes,

“The degree to which the committee focuses on the spiritual dynamics underlying the Discernment Process has an impact on every aspect of the search. Without a consistent focus on God and prayer, committees can easily become distracted...”

Each meeting began and ended with prayer and meditation, when moments were difficult, we took a “prayer break”, and we introduced the “prayer for the Selection of a New Rector” during our services. I believe my friends on the committee would agree that we were quite intentional about prayer from the very beginning.

We trusted that the Holy Spirit would be in our midst. As an invitation to the Holy Spirit and a reminder of the illumination of our path, we brought this light into the group. It was always with us, just as the Holy Spirit was with us.

Our journey was guided by faith. Oh there was faith...about a dozen variations on the theme. At the start, we arrived with own beliefs about how this process was to go and I think we all had faith that we would be able to do what we were called to do – discern God’s will and deliver a recommendation to the vestry. But we were a group of individual faiths...

The time during the spring, summer, and into the fall was a time of preparation, and the most important part of that preparation was the transformation of our group of individual faiths into a community with a more singular faith in discernment and a faith in each other...

We also sought to be grounded in the true meaning of discernment. Traditionally, the terms “Search Committee”, “Search Process”, and “Rector Search” have been used when addressing the journey that culminates in the Celebration of New Ministry. The word search, although familiar to us, does not adequately describe the spiritual foundation of our work. Search is a convenient secular description of filling an open position from a pool of qualified candidates. Our vestry will not be hiring someone to be our next rector; nor did they ask the DC to be the instrument

for those typical initial screenings, we **have** called someone to a new ministry. The process leading up to this point has been one of mutual discernment. We tried to discern God's will for St. Peter's while, at the same time, and this is the miracle, there was someone on a journey of discernment leading her to St. Peter's!!!

Allow me to fast forward past receiving names, studying resumes, profiles, and personal statements, past the shortening of lists and phone interviews.

Visitations by small groups of the DC with clergy at their home parishes were arranged. During the weekend of Feb. 1, Carmen Gelinis, Betty Hilary, Laurel Mosteller, and I drove to Ridgefield, CT to meet Emily Richards. From the first moments, I knew we were in the midst of a remarkable person; we were in the presence of a spirituality that is indescribable.

At some point along the way, we decided that recording conversations and sermons would be an efficient way for all member of the committee to stay connected with the candidates. In fact, we emailed the audio files of the phone interviews to Linda Toia so she could listen while she and Frank were driving through the hills of Guatemala. So we were sitting with Emily, recorder in the middle of the table and note paper in front of us. At the end of that time together, not one note was taken, not one...we were totally immersed...we didn't want to write...we just wanted to listen. The room was electric.

On the way home, my car was filled with energy...we could hardly believe what we experienced...why were we moved to cry tears of joy? We had been touched...touched deeply. We couldn't contain ourselves...I missed the exit for the Jersey Turnpike...it gave us a few extra miles to rejoice! Something quite profound happened to us that weekend.

Emily and her husband Daniel (their 2-year old Maggie stayed home with grand mom) visited St. Peter's in March. She met with the entire DC for the first time and then with the vestry. Prior to the visit, Emily had asked to share Eucharist with us that Saturday morning. So in between meetings, we worshipped together. By the end of the service, most, if not all present, experienced what Carmen, Betty, Laurel and I felt six weeks earlier. Let's just say that boxes of tissues appeared during the peace.

I can't wait for you all to have the same experience...

When our consultant, The Reverend Barry Miller, met with us in July, someone asked, “How will we know we made the right decision”? He simply said, “If you do it right, you’ll know”. If you do it right, you’ll know. Whoa! OK...did we believe that...I think we were getting there...but today, we have seen and we believe!

At the appointed time, we met to discern our final recommendation for the vestry. As the time approached many wondered “how long will this meeting last...are we going to agree...what if we don’t...shall we order take-out”? We were soon filled with excitement, Barry’s words rang true, and wonderfully, the first words of today’s first reading are revealed...

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership...

I believe a miracle happened at 654 N. Easton Road that day.

The record will show that the recommendation of the DC and the election by the vestry of Emily Richards to be the sixth rector of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Glenside, PA...were both unanimous.

Today our guiding flame will be extinguished but it will always dance with the power of the Holy Spirit and it will be one of our gifts to Emily during her Celebration of New Ministry.

Some time ago, I found an article by Dr. Kay Collier-McLaughlin. Dr. McLaughlin is Bishops Deputy for Communications in the Diocese of Lexington (KY) (which just so happens to be the diocese in which Emily grew up and where she was first canonically resident...go figure!)

“Experiences from secular “search” or “hiring” processes may in fact sabotage the transformational work in which a congregation is engaged during the process of discernment and call”.

I believe with all my heart that we did it the right way. We have witnessed the miracle of converging journeys and the mutual discernment of Emily Richards and St. Peter’s Church to bring us to this day.

We have seen and believed...our faith has been renewed...we are witnessing transformation in our midst.

Today we end our journey...

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul...

Today we begin a new journey...with Emily.

Praise be to God. Amen.

R.W. Hartung
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