

W Thomas – The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost Sermon
St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Oriental NC – 08-08-26
(Transcript)

Before I move more formally into what I'm going to say, I want to thank you for the privilege of being here with you. The privilege of walking as Paul was writing to the Romans. You honor me by giving me the opportunity to look more deeply inside myself and share of my faith, especially as you hear as I roll into this that my birthday, my 74th birthday is this Thursday.

And that 40 years ago this week, my family and I found ourselves at Nashotah House, which I referred to slightly last week. And so some of what I will come to today will speak to what it was like to say, yes, Lord, any place you want me to go, anything you want me to do, I will do. But that is part of where we'll go.

So let me give you what is keeping me honest with this sermon. This sermon celebrates that you are never alone, especially when you say, I believe, as we explore the gifts you are given when you least expect them and need them most, that unfold upon setting your heart on Jesus as you lock your eyes onto his. So in that statement, which I've published for you because it's a bit wordy, I have given you the definition of the word believe.

One who believes is one who sets his or her heart on something. To believe is to set your heart on something. When you got married, oh, 50 years ago, I think the two of you have been celebrating there in the back corner and others in this place.

Did you have a clue what you were getting into? No, you were setting your heart on each other and then to find that you were given when you least expected and needed it most gifts to see the days to come, especially if you could do them in and around the love of Jesus. Well, that is to set your heart because whose heart is set on us. So let me just work this through with the scripture you have heard today, the familiar one of Jesus walking on water, walking on the sea, coming to the boat, the disciples, the apostles being sore afraid.

Hey, it's windy, it's rocking the boat. I'm in Oriental. This is a place where you know about boats and water and stuff like that.

And so to see Jesus coming out from the shore and saying, peace, do not be afraid. It is I, and that's when Peter, with the depth of his willingness to step out, why he is called the rock eventually, why he became such a leader. He steps out and says, Lord, if you command me, I will walk on the water to you.

And Jesus gives him the invitation to come. Jesus looks at him. Peter sees the invitation and starts to walk on water.

While it's not in the scripture per se, and one of the reasons I give you the graphic of Jesus with strong eyes to look at, my sense is that as long as Peter is able to keep his eyes locked on Jesus, his heart set on Jesus, totally focused on Jesus, drawn into Jesus, he can do all things. But the moment he became aware of the winds and the water and his eyes started to move away, does this sound familiar to any of our own experience? He started to sink. And while he cried out, Jesus, save me, do you really think he was clear on that other than being in desperation? When he least expected it and needed it most, there was Jesus, the same Jesus, who is always there for each and every one of us if we but notice better.

So that's part of why you're here, is to heighten your noticing ability to remember that. That's one of the reasons we take a tangible remembrance in Holy Communion, and we take that in to remind us that we are not abandoned, we are not alone, that Jesus is always with us. So that's part of what I was trying to say to you, that you will never, never alone.

And if you say, I believe, well, you set your heart on it. Now, I can sit down, because I've done a traditional sermon. I'm not going to, because I have another piece to connect my own life, because our story, my story is intertwined with the story of Scripture.

And I can connect totally to what is going on in this understanding of Peter locking his eyes on Jesus. When I was a kid, and I may have mentioned this slightly somewhere, there was a Christus Rex, Jesus triumphant in robes, rising up over the altar that I served as a Roman Catholic kid. And I would see it every time I went into Mass.

When I was at Grace Church in Riverhead a little over 40 years ago, in that second Sunday of Lent, their altar was up against the wall with a Christus Rex over it. I was into the pews. We'd been there about four months.

I was in my dream job, the general manager of a radio station. Although I have to tell you, I was conflicted, because we had left the bosom of a warm church in Maine. I was beginning to feel more called to living in the life of what it was to be with people like yourselves who are out doing the good work, comparable sized churches growing together.

And here I am there, and all of a sudden, it's the second or third Sunday in Lent. And I look up and I see Jesus, his eyes, like the eyes of that statue, with the eyes of a man, bore into me. And that's when I knew I was called to be a priest.

My wife said, years later, she saw my body move. And when I told her later in the day that I was called to be a priest, her response was, I've been waiting for that for two years. When we told the people at the little church back in Maine, they were like, well, it's about time.

We all knew this, too. Larger story, deal with it later. The rector of that parish was, oh, I'm going to talk to you about this.

Something that does not happen in the life of the church. I was noted to Bishop Wicher, who had bypass surgery on Monday, Thursday that year, and somehow I slipped through the institutional talents and was allowed to visit the Shoda House, which had its largest class of years, and they were willing to entertain my joining it. And Bishop Wicher recovered enough by the end of June to meet with me.

And as I was reviewing letters he had written me back and forth, I was more clear on what we talked about than he did. I said to my wife, we agreed. Quit the job, we're going to Wisconsin, we're going to seminary.

Who knew about a commission on ministry? Anything you want me to do, any place you want me to go, yes, Lord, I believe. And I'm blessed to have a partner who can say the fullness of I believe. Even in those moments when the wind whips around us, we still find our way back to what it means to say I, we, believe, because life, in my sense, is we can only live it if we set our heart on that where life comes from.

And so 40 years ago, we pulled in and rented a far too expensive apartment with a three-year-old and first grader, and I wound up eventually being officially allowed to go to seminary for a year. And in keeping with, that's the rest of the story. I'll tell that at another time.

But I am grateful for the opportunity to be amongst a group of believers who need to be reminded of belief as much as I do, even though I get to proclaim it, because the only way I can remember it is to proclaim it and have you help me hear it as well. You help me find the strength to push back against the winds and the waves, to help me see clearly again the eyes of Jesus who called me to stand here before you and is with me always. We belong to one another.

Together, with God's help, we can make one another stronger. All these words I offer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.