

## Telling it in six words

*A sermon preached on April 11, 2010.*

Smith Magazine is the on-line home of the 'six word memoir' project. A couple of years ago, I pulled an article out of the LATimes about it and stuck it in my "sermon idea" folder. The article said that legend has it Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a novel in six words. What he came up with was, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Inspired, Larry Smith decided to challenge people to write their own story in six words and he was bowled over by the response. So he decided to start the online magazine and primed the pump with a couple celebrity offerings: Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love* wrote "Me see world! Me write stories!", and celebrity chef Mario Batali submitted "Brought to a boil, often!" I was hooked, so I read more of the entries from ordinary folk like you and me.

Here are a few I particularly liked. "Wasn't born a redhead; fixed that." "Became my mother. Please shoot me." There were a few off beat, funny ones, too, like: "One tooth, one cavity, life's cruel." "Put whole self in, shoot about." "It's pretty high. You go first." "Should not have eaten those mushrooms."

Still others were more existential; "My second grade teacher was right." "Took scenic route, got in late." Finally, there were some that were very poignant and Hemingwayesque, "Was father, boys died, still sad."

Of course, today we are talking about Thomas, so in the spirit of Smith Magazine, I decided to think of what his six word saga might be. Here is what I came up with: "Must see to believe. My God!"

I found myself thinking about Thomas for a couple of weeks leading up to Easter. Every preacher knows he's coming on this Sunday and after a while, it's hard to find anything new to say about him. But interestingly, this little Hemingway exercise did get me focused on a new thought, and I began to wonder if Thomas really doubted Jesus. Perhaps he was not responding at all to the notion that Jesus might have risen from the dead but was merely reacting to the messengers themselves, whose credibility he might have found suspect. After all, it could be argued that they all shared the same six word biography, "I'll follow you, till it's hard".

That got me to thinking about the larger question of just who all Jesus' disciples were and the roles they played in his story. First there is his mother Mary, about whom we might write, "Curtain torn made mother to all". And Peter, who was "Impetuous and afraid, forgiven, a Rock". But there is also Mary Magdalen, "Cured and accepted, loved and devoted." Are these not our stories too?

Perhaps by the end of the sermon, you will have thought what your own six word biography might be, but whatever it is, I venture it will contain at least one of the aforementioned elements. I strongly suspect, for example, that each one of us has a major event wherein we struggled mightily about whether to believe something that someone important had told us. Perhaps it was a parent, whose admonition you naturally took to heart, even as a part of you was not convinced

you should believe what you were being told. Or perhaps it was a priest, or a teacher, or a mentor. We are called by God to be people of great discernment, to be loving, caring, and moral, and that requires that sometimes we question what we are being told, we wonder about someone's credibility, we search in earnest for what we believe to be the truth. And as always, I encourage you to do that with anything I say as well!!

What about Mother Mary, Peter, and Mary Magdalene? Surely, in some way, at some time, each of us has the fabric of our lives torn, as Mary did sitting at the foot of the Cross. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell of the curtain in the Temple being torn from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' death. This curtain is described in the 1st Book of Kings as this mighty linen panel that closed off the Holy of Holies – the inner sanctuary that only the high priest could enter, once a year. God dwelt in the Holy of Holies. The Roman historian Josephus noted that it was four inches thick and could not be pulled apart by horses attached to each corner. Josephus also described it as having the image of the heavens on it. For this curtain to be torn by the death of Jesus frames that moment as a cosmic upheaval. The heavens were torn as they were at his baptism – something new was beginning. Obi Wan would have called it a huge disturbance in the force.

These are the moments that define our lives. When the fabric of our being is ripped in two, to the point that we thought it could not be repaired, and yet, as symbolized by Christ's resurrection, do we not all see that the curtain is restored, not only restored but remade, re-imagined in such a way as to make it more than it was. Mary the Mother and Mary the friend were both remade at Easter.

And Peter, good old Peter, I know he resides in all of us. We know we are afraid, we know we are all forgiven for the times we allow our fear to govern our behavior, but I suspect we are not all equally convinced that we are "the Rock". Yet this is precisely what I think Jesus was trying to tell us in his response to Peter. In Peter, the prototype of the fallible human, all of us are the Rock upon which the Church, that colony of Heaven, is built. It is only when we forget that and think we are human beings that we allow fear to control us, and for that we are forgiven, even as we are forever encouraged to remember our spiritual heritage.

And last but not least, we are Mary Magdalene, cured and accepted, devoted, and loved. We don't speak of Grace too often in the Episcopal Church, but occasionally it is good to be reminded of God's Grace. There is nothing we can do that can separate us from God, and if we ask forgiveness for having wandered away, we are given it. Above all, we are loved unconditionally.

So back to our good friend Thomas and the good news of the day. This is not about some fallen down skeptic, another case of a disciple we hoped might have done better failing to live up to our expectations. This is about each one of us and our responsibility to live in discernment, knowing that we will encounter gut wrenching loss in our lives, knowing we will sometimes let fear get the better of us, and knowing that we have done things we are not proud of but for which we have been forgiven. This is about becoming the Rock upon which Christ builds his Church, every day, because we know we are made of the same stuff he is. This is about questioning what others tell us, or what we even think ourselves sometimes, that does not jive with who Christ calls us to be, capable of great things.

