

Biblical scholars agree that Mark relates this story in the Gospel this morning because his community had been going through a rough patch. And so Mark invites his diverse and conflicted parishioners into Jesus' story in order to reframe how they think about their lives, their commitments, their identity, and their vision of what constitutes authentic Christian community.

We too have our share of disagreements. A feasibility study by Evergreen Philanthropic Solutions revealed in July of 2023 that our congregation was deeply divided about what to do about the bell tower. I came to you just a year ago (this very weekend) as your interim. We have spent the past year getting to know one another, rebuilding trust, and revitalizing ministry groups within our congregation. And amid all this, one vestry member asks late last Spring, "So, when are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?" Which of course is a reference to the bell tower, requiring a sizable capital investment.

For some, the process regarding the bell tower felt rushed and to others it didn't move fast enough. Some felt well-informed and others seemed in the dark or shut out of the conversation. Two plans rose to the top (of several options considered) to address the issues associated with the tower. One was to restore the tower as it was and the other was to remove the tower and extend the roof line over the chapel (which sits below the tower) into the roof line of the church. It was this second plan which church leaders pursued as being the most cost effective in securing the envelop of the building. Shortly afterward, there became a clear division of those for and those against this plan. Once Evergreen determined that we were unable to raise the million dollars required, the project came to a halt. The rector met with the Bishop and Vestry in August to tender her resignation.

Phew! that's a lot; we have expended a lot of emotional energy. I feel exhausted just relating this briefest of summaries to you! And now we have had a year to step back, gain some equilibrium, and in the words of St. Benedict, "begin again."

We begin again, slowly. At our meeting after this service, we'll meet in the parish hall. We'll meet with the full knowledge of who we are and who's we are: Children of God, worthy of love and respect, knowing that God will use us to change the world.

As I said, this has been an emotional rollercoaster for many. Some have been carrying heavy burdens, some have felt hurt, some may be carrying grudges. And I know some of you have no idea about the dilemma of the bell tower at St. Thomas. To drive that point home, a new parishioner called me this past week and ask, "So, Paul, what's all this about the bell tower?" Maybe you are relatively new to the parish or are just visiting us today. I hope you too will benefit from this liturgy this morning recognizing that life is hard. We all carry regrets, hurts, anger,

regrets and sorrows. We all fall short of the glory of God and yet...and yet by God's grace, *we begin again.*

Maybe today is a day for confession, to say I'm sorry, to take responsibility for not loving God and neighbor fully. In a moment, I will send some baskets around and in them you will find a rock. They are as different from one another as we are. Choose a rock and hold it as we offer a Litany of Confession (normally reserved for Ash Wednesday). Think of the heavy things you carry around with you spiritually. At the conclusion of the Confession of Sin, I invite you to come to the altar and drop your stone in the water, let go of all that weighs you down, keep you captive, things that keep you from being the person God intends you to be. As you drop your stone in the water, glance at it and notice how the colors become more brilliant. You see baptism changes everything! Our story becomes part of the story of Jesus Christ, Redeemer of the World, and of his reconciling love that calls forth our very best. And once everyone is back in place, I'll invite you to stand for absolution and to receive Christ's peace.

Forgiving is one of our primary actions, so much so, that our Lord included it in the prayer he taught his disciples, "...as we forgive..." Forgiveness is the glue that binds us together and as Rob Voyle reminds us "We have been entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation...not a a ministry of conflict management."

Let us this day, begin again and enter into a new chapter together. As Jesus' twenty-first century disciples let us write a different ending to this gospel scene. "We saw some people, Lord, who were (fill in the blank)...all in your name. They do not follow us. In fact, we really disagree with them. But we did not try to stop them, and they gave us a cup of cold water...And that was refreshing!"

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St. Thomas' Church, Camden, Maine*

Introduction to the Litany of Confession p. 267 ([The Book of Common Prayer](#))

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

—Matthew 11:28-30

Invitation to come to the altar with a stone

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

—1 Peter 2:4-5