

Tapestry Conference
Indianapolis, Indiana - June, 28, 2006
Harry Knox

Luke 24:36b-48
1 John 3:1-7

As the Director of the Religion and Faith Program at the Human Rights Campaign, it is my privilege to have one of those rare jobs that allows me to be in Atlanta on Sunday, Saint Louis on Tuesday and Wednesday, Kansas City on Thursday, Cincinnati over the weekend, and in Indianapolis the week after that. It can be hard on the body, but I have to tell you, for me it is good for the soul because at every stop I am witness to courageous clergy and lay people who are literally changing the way people of faith in the United States understand their faith and the role of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the church, the synagogue, the mosque, the statehouse, and the community.

That has been no less true here at the Tapestry conference as you have shared with me the work you are doing from Boise to San Juan. Your personal stories of faithfulness have moved and challenged me and I am most grateful to have yet another opportunity to share my thoughts with you and to try to set the tone for a productive day of work and play and worship and praise. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this chance to be with you.

Many people ask me why the Human Rights Campaign has begun the Religion and Faith Program. The reality is that HRC has not suddenly gotten religion. The purpose behind the program is. Not surprisingly, political. When our lobbyists go up on Capitol Hill to meet with members of Congress about, say, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or the hate crime bill, or even marriage equality, they are often surprised by how many members actually support such legislation...

Our work at the Religion and Faith Program is about equipping people of faith to talk about LGBT social and political issues from a faith perspective – from their particular faith perspective, whatever that may be – in what my friend Paul Nixon calls our Mother Tongue, the language of faith. For too long we who advocate for full inclusion of LGBT people in our society have responded to the religious arguments of our opponents with scientific and constitutional answers. We have brought apples to an orange fight. But that is changing. All over this country spirit-filled people are standing up for their LGBT neighbors and LGBT people of faith are speaking out for ourselves, using the rich language of justice, and community, and unconditional love that is primarily the language of faith.

When I add my voice to the chorus of those raised in this communal call to repentance and new power and fresh joy, I try not to dilute the power of my message by rushing too quickly to ecumenism and interfaith language. I speak to you as a Christian who believes Christ is alive and that Jesus' resurrection is a manifestation of the will of God that we all be given the hope of eternal life in heaven and empowered living here on earth.

And if I am clear that my personal testimony is a Christian one, I must also tell you that it is a typically American Christian story. I was raised in the First United Methodist Church of Cordele, Georgia, and am now, by God's grace, a member of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Washington, DC. My dad was raised in Trinity Lutheran Church in New Orleans, a congregation of the Missouri Synod. My mama was brought up in the Ross Avenue Church of God, Anderson Branch in Hamilton, Ohio. Several of my forebears were Southern Baptists, one was a Baptist Abolitionist in Eastern Kentucky – he was kind of a trouble maker – I'm sort of fond of him. There is evidence that one set of great grandparents were German Jews who became Lutherans when they came to this country – they never talked to their children about the reasons why and the mystery of how that change came about is lost to us.

My personal spiritual heritage stems from Abraham and Rachel, branches through the Reformation, Wesley, Roger Williams, and the Cane Brake Revival of the early 1800s and ends up in a leafy tangle that is brightened by the music of little birds singing Bill and Gloria Gaither gospel songs.

Am I not a wonder? Ain't I an American sure enough? Friends, I am proud to say that I am a Christian despite and because of the rollicking history that precedes me and which has, in its arguments and trials and rebirths and revivals, at every step reiterated the good news that I am a sinner saved by grace through the loving fiat of almighty God. And I rejoice in the sure knowledge that so are you. My personal history makes me open to the incredible gifts of those who come from other perspectives. I celebrate and learn from them every day. But in this teaching moment, I wanted you to know where I am coming from.

I have been reflecting on where I come from as I listened to our texts for today. They show up during the Easter season in the lectionary – that period between the Resurrection and Pentecost when Christ is literally present in risen form and the disciples are bumping into the furniture because every once in awhile He just pops up among them. The Easter season begins to move us in our thinking from where we have been to where we are now and to give us a little hint of where we might go. During Eastertide, Pentecost is coming, but it isn't here yet. The time of powerful action is coming, but right now is a season of reflection on who we are, who we will be, if we are friends of, followers of, sisters and brothers to the Risen Christ. Eastertide is kind of like this conference – a time of remembering who and Whose we are, of discovering new personas and capacities, and of dreaming about what might be.

As I have remembered where I have come from and listened to these writings from Luke and John, I have hit on the idea that maybe I want to be an Easter activist.

Now activist is a title I resisted for awhile. I read about myself in the newspaper from time to time and it is always a little jarring to me to see myself called an activist. Doesn't that just sound like somebody with a permanently furrowed brow - someone whose fist is always in the air – voice raised in a shout – handmade protest sign always at the ready in

the trunk of the car? I like those people. I have been moved and educated and motivated by them. But it took me a long time to count myself among them.

For one thing, I had to learn that most activists are actually happy, hopeful people who are fun to be around. They operate from a spirit of joy that transcends their righteous anger and gives them the ability to speak truth to power with conviction, but also to know that the real Power lies somewhere other than the office at which they are pointing their placards.

In order to embrace my role as an activist, I also had to get over my sense that activists were always sure of what they believed. I am not always confident that I am right and I thought for a long time that prophecy required assurance. What I have discovered by reading the Bible is that most prophets don't believe a word they are about to speak right up to the moment they say, "Thus says the Lord..."

I have been better able to accept myself as an activist since I've come to understand that my confidence is not in the perfection of my message, but in the perfect wisdom of the One who has called me to work for justice now – not when I get it all figured out – now.

Since I am starting to talk about themes that show up in our texts, let's look at them more explicitly.

First the Gospel lesson. I was on a panel in Washington recently with Bishop Gene Robinson, the saint God has called to be the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church. He pointed out to the group we were addressing that in all His appearances to the Disciples after the Resurrection, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are "Don't be afraid." Gene had clearly been reflecting on this passage from Luke when he said, "I don't think the reason people are afraid of the risen Christ is just because they think they are seeing a ghost. I think it's because we don't know who we are, who we are supposed to be in the presence of someone who has come back from the dead."

He is surely right. Our role changes when we come to terms with the idea that we serve a Christ Who is truly alive.

To begin with, it means that being alive is a good thing. It means that our focus is not to be solely on what will happen when we are no longer in these bodies. Our purpose is not simply to sit and wait for the Reign of God with patient endurance. What happens now – we're back to that word, now – what happens now really matters.

Easter activists have a distinctly different message from those whose only hope is in the by and by. Easter activists are in the Presence of One whose vitality demands an immediate, active response.

I love the homely way Luke tells part of this story. Jesus asks the Disciples and the women who were the working end of the band of followers, "do you have anything to eat?" That's the sort of question you ask at a real friend's house. Not in high society, not

in the formal living room of someone you just met, but sitting in the den with a close friend. “Is there anything in the refrigerator?”

A close friend doesn't hesitate to ask for what is needed. A close friend knows without really thinking about it that she can ask us for even a hard favor because we know she would do anything for us. And implicit in every request is the history of all that she has done for us before.

The One who stretched two loaves and five little fish across a table set for 5000 doesn't hesitate to say, “is there any casserole left over?”

What a wonderful celebration of the body – that the risen Christ still gets hungry and enjoys a good piece of fish.

Easter activists don't have to act like the body is something to be put up with until it can be shed on our ascent to Heaven.

I know how tiresome our bodies can get to be. I'm a 45 year old man who sags and aches in the same places you do. But rejoice with me! Last April I celebrated the 20th anniversary of my diagnosis with HIV. I have been given a gift of longevity that far too many do not receive. I love this battered, creaking old ship, if only because it has been my privilege to live and learn and love in it a lot longer than I thought I would 20 years ago.

And let me just say, carefully, if you please, that as a gay Easter activist I am a little tired of constantly talking about sex and never having time to actually have any.

The risen Easter Jesus calls us to repentance, and for some of us that is a call to turn away from compulsive sexual behavior that is deadening to the soul, not life-affirming. But this conversation is taking place in the den of our homes with a trusted Friend. Jesus doesn't want us to denigrate the marvelous gift from God of sexuality. Jesus celebrates our love for our partners – even brings the good wine to the wedding. If Jesus cautions us, it is as One who brought us the gift in the first place, but recognizes that it is a powerful trust that has been given.

A lot of our fellow Christians say, “Sex is dangerous to my mortal soul, so I'm going to do everything I can to limit its power over me and to limit its power in the world.” An Easter activist says to himself, “This relationship business is hard. I think I'll talk with my friend Jesus about it and see what He has to say.” Life is so good Jesus came back from the dead to get some more. As an Easter activist I should celebrate and fully live in my body right up to the time God, in God's wisdom, replaces it with something - imagine this! - even better.

We need to say a little more about repentance.

As an Easter activist, living in the Presence of the risen Christ, I feel the need constantly to re-evaluate how my life reflects on my friendship with Jesus. I am a gay man who lives in the United States of America and I'm here to tell you, if you don't know it already, that that can be hard sometimes. But I am also a white man in the richest and most powerful country in the world. And that is a burden on my journey with Jesus because just as Jesus cares about justice for me, Jesus demands justice for those whose labor is exploited so that I can live in luxury compared with 95% of the rest of God's people. And the living Easter Jesus demands justice now.

My co-worker, Kyla Bollens-Lund, had a chance, in her winsome, Unitarian way, to witness to the powers that be in our office the other day. She handles all my travel arrangements, so she went to the meeting about travel issues that was called by the bosses. In the midst of explaining all the techniques for saving money wherever possible, the operations manager threw in an aside that the good news was that our agreement with Avis Rental Cars allows us to get routine upgrades so we can have SUVs instead of sedans. Our Kyla raised her hand and said, "As an environmentalist and a justice advocate, how does it look for Harry to drive up to struggling open and affirming congregations in the biggest vehicle in the parking lot?" You can bet the conversation changed from there.

It's the little things – a piece of fish – the car I drive – what I do about dating – that make a difference as I seek to live into this calling to be an Easter activist. The speeches I make at the big rallies don't mean much unless I act like Jesus at home and at work and in gay bars.

You see, I have to think about that sort of thing because I have been called to offer good news to the oppressors – if they repent of their sin of bigotry and discrimination, God will forgive their sin and God's Reign will be more fully realized. That kind of good news takes a lot of humility to offer.

Finally, just a note about how, indeed, Easter activists see our calling differently from those whose eyes are mostly on Heaven and not on those whose lot they can improve on Earth. In our text and throughout his letters, John gives us a wonderful model for understanding our relationship with God. We are God's children, now. John doesn't say we will be God's children when we've made it to Heaven. We are, by God's grace, God's children now.

Those who oppose justice in the name of Jesus have a fundamentally different view of religion and of the proper relationship with God than do Easter activists. They are toiling under the old heresy of works righteousness, under the old Gnostic heresy that the flesh is all evil and the spirit is all that is good. They believe that this world is only to be put up with, not enjoyed.

We have a message of hope and good news for them. The revival we offer comes from God, but is our responsibility to deliver. It will take all the commitment we have, all the

power God has promised, and all the humility we can muster, but it will come. Thus says the Lord.

Amen.