

By Kyle Arrington

When Father Mark asked me to speak about what St. Mark's means to my wife and I, I felt honored and was flooded with ideas of what I would speak about. As a writer I tend to go all the way to the deepest root to find the traces of the seed that made the tree. Thus many of my stories are long-winded. But as it is with most tales of what people find significant in their lives, it isn't just this beautiful church for me or the enlightening services or the warm people of this congregation...it came down to something deeply rooted in: my life-long struggle with religion as a whole. You may not know me but my name is Kyle Arrington, I was born in Ohio, raised in Augusta, GA, went to Florida State University where I met my beautiful wife and I was baptized right here during last year's Easter Vigil when I was 25 years old.

Why get baptized at 25? The more important question though is "why St. Marks"? And here's where I dig deep.

My father was raised in all-boy Catholic schools in Washington, D.C with the dreams of being doctor. He went to medical school in Ohio where he met my mother, a sweet woman from a loving family. She was raised – as she calls it – “an occasional Episcopalian” with a love for God but a disdain for anything that would interrupt her Sunday morning horseback-riding lessons. As most young adults do, they both casually veered away from churchgoing in college to discover themselves. When I was 5, my father accepted a job in Georgia so we moved south.

Up until my early 20s, I told many unfair tales of the harshness of Southern religion, but all I can do now is recall my personal experiences and leave the judgment for the birds. As a young boy newly transplanted to Georgia, everything excited me and everything moved me. Though I was this northern, secular child, the Southern Baptist families seemed to welcome me into their lives. On one occasion just before my 6th birthday, I was sleeping over at a new friend's house and I saw him kneel by his bed and bury his head into his hands – something I hadn't seen before. He told me he prayed to God every night to make sure he went to heaven and that I surely had some catching up to do to save my soul. Soon after my mother found me feverishly praying that I not go to hell and she explained to me that people believe different things when it comes to God and that if I didn't adhere to my friend's beliefs, it didn't mean I was hell-bent. Throughout my childhood and into adolescence, I rarely came across anyone who shared my beliefs. A wall would be put up after peers asked me where I went to church. I would say, “I don't go to church” to which some would say, “oh, so you're Jewish.” Because of this disconnect I was lumped in with the non-Baptists: Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists and non-religious families. These families actually welcomed me, their children became my friends and I subsequently grew up angry at Christians.

Being rejected by people because of my beliefs hurt me very much. All I ever wanted was to be accepted in this new city. While I strived to just be a good person I was shocked at the coldness around me from people who called themselves saved – I did not want to be one of them. But then I learned something in high school: it wasn't Christianity. Some people are just closed-minded. Some people are full of hate. And some people are just scared. I did not want to be scared.

Once in college, I took religious studies classes learning about the history of religion around the world in order to demystify what had confused me my whole life. I even taste-tested the Catholic, Methodist and Baptists churches in Tallahassee, FL which, weren't my cup of tea but they really opened my eyes. I had

By Kyle Arrington

begun to really profoundly understand why people use religion to guide and protect them in their lives – it was not that dissimilar from my dreams as a child to understand this world, the root of humanity and the seed of goodness that I know is in everyone. And if there was any trace of doubt in me it was gone once I met my wife. Like my friends in Augusta who had showed me my anger was displaced, she was kind, warm, accepting and had been raised Episcopalian. Through the course of our friendship and into our relationship, it was hard for me to say the word “God” with any real conviction but the truth was there had to be a God if this woman existed.

After I graduated from graduate School, I proposed to Whitney and we moved out west so I could pursue my dreams of becoming a screenwriter. Now we needed to start thinking about a life together, one that was more than just fun and carefree but mature and grounded. We wanted God to be a large part of that but I needed a church that was a perfect fit. It didn’t take long for us. We came to St. Marks on Christmas Eve 2009 and that was it. The sights, smells and sounds were enveloping and I was moved by the sermon that Father Mark gave. He was full of wisdom, compassion, honesty and his sermon on the gospel transmuted a verse that was confusing into something that was relevant to me. It was if I was being told not to leave my doubt at the door but to bring it in, recognize it and let all of me, good and bad, be present here with God. How else can I grow as a person if I don’t accept myself for who I am? We kept coming back to St. Mark’s each time we met new people and felt more and more welcome. We moved to a city where we had no family, but suddenly we did.

We have since volunteered for clean-up parties, feeding the homeless with Path Achieve – now Ascencia – and we are proud to pledge to St. Mark’s. Also, we have had the continued pleasure of teaching Sunday school to an amazing group of Junior and Senior high kids. The best thing about Sunday school: I am learning more from the kids than they learn from me and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I love the family Whitney and I have built here. You’ve accepted us, treated us well, kept our hearts open and our sights trained on a Godly life. There was no other place for me to be baptized. There was no better person to marry my wife and I than Father Mark. And there is no other place that I can call my church – partly because it’s my first but mostly because it felt like the home the moment we arrived. From my story, you can see my journey to God has been riddled with challenges, moments that have made me question what I know about myself and what kind of relationship I could have with God. I lay my demons to rest when I walk through those doors. Because St. Mark’s is home.