



February 26, 2006

Preaching: Ronni Sue Verboom

Transfiguration Sunday

Mark 9:1-2-9

“Light for the path”

The path of life is not always over neat, crunchy gravel and smooth terrain. Our evening news reminds us of the tangled growth, the steep, slippery inclines that confront us along the road. Our personal situations can be equally painful, messy and difficult at times. I have encountered my share of rocky places on my path through life. At one point I found that my first thought upon waking, day after day, was: “Life is hard. Life is hard.” With a sigh and a groan I would get up to face the day, praying to God for strength and courage.

I don't care how old you are or what your experiences have been. You all know the truth of this- the path of life can lead us through dark places. Adults might not want to think this is true for children, or for youth- with their lives stretching before them like clean white pages still to be written on. But, like it or not, it's true that even little children, and certainly the youth of the world, have met up with trouble spots on the path of life. Kids have to face teachers, peers and even their parents, in situations that cause them pain.

This is true for all of us, of all circumstances and ages. This has been true for people of all times and centuries, everywhere. It was true for Jesus, and for his friends and followers. Our Gospel lesson today opens with an ordinary situation in the life of Jesus and three of his friends: Peter, James and John. They go up on a high mountain together. There was nothing strange about that- they often went off the beaten track to retreat from the demands of life.

The little group that climbed the mountain that day knew that life is hard. They had all surely lost loved ones- this was a time when disease was rampant and people died young. They had seen violence. John the Baptist had been arrested and then beheaded- Jesus' own relative.

We might think that having Jesus with them would at least have quieted the fears of his disciples- they'd seen him heal, and cast out demons. But we know they still felt fear. They were afraid on stormy seas, even with Jesus in the boat. When he calmed the seas, they were still afraid, because what kind of person can DO that?

Jesus spoke of things they couldn't understand. One minute he was praising them for their insight- as when Peter told him, "You are the Messiah, son of the living God." But Peter's next words brought him a stony stare from Christ as he said, "Get behind me, Satan!" In that case all Peter had done was to suggest that life's path might not HAVE to take Jesus to the cross. Surely there could be an alternate route, he thought. And Jesus yelled at him.

So, they climbed up that mountain, on an ordinary day, bearing the burdens of ordinary life. Then they arrived at the top. And suddenly nothing was ordinary at all. Jesus was transfigured—full of light—glowed from within. We sense that words are not adequate to describe the light that changed Christ's appearance. And if that was not out-of-the-ordinary enough, Moses and Elijah suddenly appeared with Jesus. They had not been seen or heard from for hundreds of years. Moses, the great law-giver, honored Jesus, the fulfillment of the law. Elijah, the great prophet, bowed before Christ, a greater prophet.

But that wasn't all. A cloud appeared overhead and God's voice proclaimed: "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!" Glowing face and clothes, visits from saints of the past, hovering clouds and a divine voice- there was nothing ordinary about any of it. It was so extraordinary that when it was all over, and Jesus was heading down the mountain with his friends, he said, "Don't tell anyone about this." That made sense. No one would have believed it any way.

But the three of them believed it. They had been there. And the light that shone on that mountain would change the way they saw everything forever after. They KNEW God and Jesus to be REAL, VITAL, FULL OF POWER. They had light for the path of life when it grew dark again, and it would. They had hope and a promise that what they thought was ordinary and regular and just plain hard at times: LIFE--- was not all it appeared to be. They had hope that life is filled with a glory and light that can never be extinguished.

It's as though, for one shining moment, God cracked the door to the end of time and gave them a preview of the Resurrection. There were still days of suffering ahead for them, dark days. But knowing God's ways, Christ's ways of love and forgiveness will triumph in the end- this changes the way we handle the dark. If Jesus' suffering, and even his death led him not to darkness, but to divine light----- then what surprises might any day hold for US, as we trust in the presence of the same Christ, here with us right now?

In Robert Fulghum's book, *All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten*, there are many examples of this kind of experience- surprising bursts of light in a world that is often dark. Fulghum's stories are true stories. He tells of a 33 year old truck driver who was sitting in his lawn chair in his back yard one day, wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember he had wanted to fly, but he'd never had the money or opportunity to be a pilot. Hang gliding was out because there was no place for that near his home. So he spend a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his yard in his ordinary old aluminum chair- the kind with the webbing and the rivets that we all have used.

One day Larry hooked 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his chair. He put on a parachute, hooked a six-pack of beer to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down.

He lifted off in his lawn chair, expecting to climb a couple hundred feet over his neighborhood. Instead, he shot up 11,000 feet right through the approach corridor to the Los Angeles International Airport. When asked by the press why he did it, Larry answered, "Well, you can't just SIT there." When asked if he was scared, he said, "Yes, wonderfully so."

This man will never be the same after his trip above the mountains in his lawn chair. The disciples could not be the same after their trip up the mountain with Jesus. For ever after there is a state of expectancy within us, waiting for the light to burst in upon the dark. Just that expectancy alone can light the dark with an enduring amber glow.

John Vannorsdall writes: "On an evening walk last summer- - a lazy walk through back alleys near the railroad tracks- - my wife and I came across a surprising garden and talked as best we could with an elderly man who spoke mostly Italian. The railroad embankment was a disaster of broken bottles, empty cans, weed trees and brambles. Good Friday's land. But twenty-five feet wide from alley to tracks it was terraced and neatly rowed with beans, leaf lettuce, tomatoes and other growing things. Good Friday's land, wounded and scarred, became Easter's garden where the trains still rattled, but evening strollers paused before evidence of reversal and healing."

On Sundays we gather to pray and sing, read Scripture and ponder. Ordinary things we do together each week. But friends, there really is nothing ordinary about what we do. Every Scripture, every hymn, every prayer- these are ways God cracks open the door so we might see his light- light that SHINES IN the darkness, and cannot be quenched.

We do not know all that will happen to us in this life, or to our world. But we receive here every Sunday the promise that God's ways of love, mercy, forgiveness, and justice will prevail.

We soak up light with that promise- light for the path forward from this hour, light to carry with us through Good Friday's land. The light we bear changes us—it changes our expectations; it changes our behavior. The light leads us to love gardens, to plant our own gardens to flourish in unexpected places. May our gardens become places of refreshment for weary travelers. **THIS IS GOD'S PLAN** for our lives.

Life is hard. The path gets dark. But God's light still shines in all darkness. God calls us to be light bearers along the way. What light is he calling you to bring into the coming week? Who in your life needs love and mercy? Who in your community needs your voice calling for justice? Who in your school is dealing with conflict and pain? Who needs to hear God's promises- to peek through the crack in the door that leads to light everlasting? Friends, God is counting on you to carry his light. It's up to you.. you decide in the midst of each day. Carry the light, friends. Carry the light. Amen.