



**April 30, 2006**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

Luke 24: 13-16, 28-48

## “It All Started Back in Jerusalem”

Years ago, when my husband and I were first becoming acquainted, he shared with me different impressions he had formed of the U.S. and its people. From the perspective of a French citizen recently arrived in our country, he noticed things that I didn't. One thing that surprised him was the way people asked each other, “What nationality are you?” Now that was a logical question when addressed to him—and he'd reply simply, “I'm French.” But he wondered why Americans would ask this of each other. Wouldn't it get boring after a while, hearing everyone say, “I'm American.” ?? “You, too? I'm American also!” “What do you know about that! I am too!”

To his surprise, that's not how it went. People who appeared completely American to him would say, “I'm Irish,” or “I'm Norwegian and Scotch,” or “I'm German and Italian.” He gradually realized these conversations dealt with ancestry and background- with issues of descent and stories of journeys and roots.

We are all people with stories to tell- tales of voyages and travel, adventures and hard times. Even if we've lived most of even all of our years in one state or county or town- even if several generations before us lived in that SAME place, we still know some of the travel tales that lead up to this present moment. These stories locate us in the human family, in the history of continents and nations, in the history of the world.

In this nation, many of us know stories that began in Europe. But there are other stories that tell about today's Americans- stories of slave ships and inhumanity, bondage and suffering. There are stories of the FIRST Americans, Native Americans- of the destruction of a way of life, of many trails of sorrow and tears. There are stories of refugee camps in Laos, of violence in Sudan, that some of our fellow Americans can tell.

Whatever the stories tell, they are important to us. They remind us of WHO WE ARE, WHERE WE CAME FROM. We need to listen to ALL these stories, even those that are painful reminders of human wrongs. God speaks through our words.

The Bible is full of stories, honest ones, that reveal our human triumphs and tragedies, our courage and cowardice, our righteousness and evil. These stories are OUR stories, just as much as those we've received from our human families. The Bible stories tell of God in our midst, at work in and through our faith and stumbling.

Stories have wonderful power and possibility. They reach into us and speak on many levels. God must love stories, because Jesus so often taught using them. We need to hold on to, or recapture the way we approached stories as children. Think how your ears prick up when an uncle or grandmother says, "Well, it all started back in the old country when your great-great grandmother Sarah met great-great grandpa Jonathan." We come closer to listen, to hang around, and ask questions, drinking it all in.

I'd like us, today to recognize a truth. As Christians, we have a story, and a family that has passed that story along to us. The stories of Easter, are OUR stories. The people are OUR ancestors, and the things they experienced have led up to who we are today. What we are today, what we are doing here in this church sanctuary, ALL OF THIS STARTED BACK IN JERUSALEM in the days that followed the first Easter.

Our Scripture story for today, tells us where we came from, how "it all started back in Jerusalem". Imagine a favorite tale spinner from your own life. Picture this person seated out on a breezy porch on a summer day- or by a crackling fire burning at a campsite in the woods where the Indians lived and told their stories. The person begins to speak:

*I remember, the story was told to me by great-aunt Catherine when I was no bigger than your little sister. You see, your great-great-great.....well, let's just say LOTS of greats—Uncle James was walking with one of his friends in the far-away country where they lived then. They were really upset. Sadder than you were when your cat died last winter. REALLY downhearted. I mean their hearts were covered with dust- sunk way down into the soles of their bare feet as they walked that dry road.*

*They were both young then, and they'd taken up with this fiery preacher and teacher. They were beaten-down folks, you know. They had a foreign power that ran their country. It was a pure dictatorship. They had some pretty fiery, smokin'*

*dreams themselves- of changing things. Booting out the dictator's armies and cleaning things up in their country. They'd thought this preacher fellow was the one who could do it, actually. But he'd been arrested, tortured and killed. So here they were, just a few days later, absolutely at the end of their ropes.*

*But wouldn't you know, things weren't what they seemed at all. Because the fellow, the teacher, his name was Jesus—this man was close to God in a special kind of way. Actually, seems like God was IN him, or lived THROUGH him in a way. ANYWAY, this Jesus was raised from the dead.*

*I KNOW, I know—don't look at me with those rolling eyes! You're thinking, "Oh, sure, I'm no fool... think you can put one of your wild stories over on me?" Think again. I tell you, that's how they felt, too, walking that dusty road. But they were there. They saw him. Talked with him. Touched him, even. He showed up on the road, and stayed with them for dinner. They recognized him as he was breaking off a chunk of bread to sop up some sauce.*

*Their other friends, who also loved and followed the teacher, were holed up in this out of the way room. They were worried and scared and confused. The two travelers hurried over there, all excited, talking both at the same time, saying they'd actually SEEN Jesus.*

*The others rolled their eyes kind of like you did just a minute ago--- but not for long, cuz, you see, Jesus..... showed up again. They were all pretty spooked, let me tell you--- they figured he must be a ghost. But he told them he wasn't and said, "Come on, everybody--- grab hold of me. Now, does that feel like a ghost?" He was hungry, I guess, asked for something to eat, and they managed to come up with a snack for him.*

*They were still kind of worked up, you know, blinking pretty hard, pinching themselves, smiling big silly grins. But Jesus mostly ignored their confusion and told them it was time to regroup. He said, "Here's the plan: You need to tell folks what's happened and what you've seen. Preach repentance and forgiveness of sins. Tell people that God is wanting to help them turn their lives around. Start out here in Jerusalem—then go—take it and fan out."*

That is OUR story. It's not just a story for Sunday school or church. It's not just a story for and about dusty ancient people. It's the story of OUR roots, OUR ancestry, OUR journey. It's the story of the very beginning back in Jerusalem. It tells us who WE are and what we are doing. We are still following the Game Plan Jesus laid out after his snack that evening in Jerusalem. We're fanning out, see? We are witnesses, bearers of the story. We continue the journey AND the story.

We can tell others this story the same way we talk about our ancestors and their histories. We can tell our friends, our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

Tell the story. But don't try to control people's RESPONSE to the story. Jesus didn't do that. He just told the stories and let them work on people. He didn't do a lot of explaining or interpreting for folks. We can trust that God is IN the story and speaks to others through it, in a personal way.

When I was a child I was told that a brother of George Washington was my ancestor. In response to that story, I felt some pride- which my parents anticipated. But later, after I'd learned more about history and the world, I felt some shame, for I'd discovered that George Washington and his family owned slaves. Now THAT was a piece of my personal history as well. And my parents were startled by my response. My delight in learning of the possibility that a great-grandmother may have descended from an Indian woman and a French trapper took them totally by surprise.

I share this to illustrate: stories are to be TOLD, not TAUGHT. Told and shared. We needn't worry about what others think about them, how the stories make them feel or respond. God is in the story and will bring light and truth in a personal way.

Just as we tell stories of our families and ancestry we are called to tell our story, the story of our brother, our Redeemer, the story of Jesus... the story of God's love, or forgiveness for sins. We are called to tell the story about how it all started.... back in Jerusalem. Today, let's go, and fan out!  
(New church brochures will be passed out to all- inviting folks to take one for themselves, and a second to share—one way they can go and “fan out”!)