



April 6, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 24:13-35

“Nobody Here But Us Ghosts”

I grew up with television. We got our first T.V. when I was five. Every weekday all the kids playing outside would head into our house at 5 p.m., to watch an hour of cartoons. We were transported to fantasy lands of crazy antics carried out mostly by talking animals.

I remember a vivid cartoon that made me laugh, but also scared me a little. It was Bugs Bunny, or maybe Daffy Duck—one of those guys is driving along a lonely road at night, in the middle of a terrible storm. Lightning flares, thunder rumbles. The car breaks down. Our hero gets out of the car and in a flash of lightning sees on the hill before him a huge tumbledown old house. He runs there for shelter to wait out the storm. Of course the door creaks as he enters, there are cobwebs everywhere, cracked mirrors, furniture shrouded in sheets. Bugs, or Daffy--- hears a noise behind him. Windows clack and a door slams shut. In a tremulous voice he asks, “Anybody here?” Hushed voices reply, “Oh no, there’s nobody here... nobody here but us ghosts!” This was followed by echoing, cackling laughter. At this point I’d leave the room to help my mom in the kitchen—it was too spooky for this five year old!

There is something inherently frightening to us about unseen reality. I believe this fear is universal. There are different ways we deal with it. Some test this fear by watching horror movies, exploring the occult. Others do all they can to avoid reading books or seeing shows about haunted houses or alien abductions. Some of us embrace what we call “the voice of reason” which tells us plainly, UNSEEN REALITY DOESN’T EXIST. Period. If we can’t observe it in some way, then it’s not real. Advanced scientific methods have enlarged human abilities to record and perceive with instruments what we can’t record or perceive with unaided human senses. But still, we often decide things that cannot be verified scientifically just don’t exist.

What is real and what isn't? Are there realities we don't perceive with our ordinary senses? I believe there are AND that GOD has given us the means to perceive these realities right in the middle of our ordinary world WITH A KIND OF SIXTH SENSE. Let's consider our Gospel for today and see what light it might shed on this issue.

Here we have two followers of Jesus walking to a little town called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. Their senses have perceived some unwelcome realities. They SAW their friend and teacher arrested, beaten and executed as a criminal. They SAW him buried in a stone tomb, and are now HEARING that his followers are in danger. They HEARD from some women his body wasn't in the tomb- maybe it was stolen? Then some women said they SAW angels who told them Jesus was alive, but how can you trust such a vision? Others went to the tomb and found it empty, but there was no sign of Jesus being alive. They decided to go home and get out of the city where they were seeing and hearing such terrible things.

As they walk, they talk, trying to sort all this out. Another traveler shows up. He asks them what they're talking about, so they share their version of what is going on, based on what they have seen and heard. The traveler surprises them by saying, "You haven't got it quite right." And he talks with them about Hebrew Scripture, and how those writings are related to what they've experienced. They are rapt listeners. They begin to perceive that REALITY might be different than they had thought. Arriving at Emmaus, they beg the stranger to join them for dinner. He agrees. At the table, he breaks bread and gives it to them. Suddenly, a new reality is clear—THIS is JESUS. He is alive. Just as they perceive this truth, hidden in the ordinary events of their day, Jesus vanishes from their sight.

Friends, this story teaches me that what I put together as I go through life, about what is REAL, may not be REAL at all, because some things are missing. What does this Emmaus story show me might be missing in my conclusions?

FIRST- the stories of others—especially the stories of Scripture. My human family, my brothers and sisters through thousands of years have shared stories of who God is and how God relates to our human family. These stories need to be a part of MY story, and MY story can only be understood when it's placed in the middle of the sacred stories of Scripture. My life is only a PIECE of what is REAL. Our little piece can only be understood when we perceive its place as part of something bigger.

But even after Jesus spoke to the travelers about Scripture, the followers still didn't see who he was! This tells us THINKING isn't enough. It's an important part of perceiving reality, but not enough in itself.

What's next in the Gospel story? What else is missing?

DOING. DOING comes next. The followers of Jesus DO something. They invite a stranger to share a meal with them. And JESUS DOES something—he breaks bread and hands it directly to them. THAT's when they finally get it. That's when they discover what is REAL. Jesus is alive and with them.

Next, Jesus vanishes from their sight. This is fascinating and powerful. These two followers thought they knew what was real. Jesus was killed and buried. They saw it with their own eyes. But now they know he is alive. They received that truth when they invited a stranger to eat with them, and when the stranger passed food to them. They saw Jesus alive with their own eyes- but he vanished. Did they say, “Oh, no, that must have been a hallucination or something”? Not at all. Their conviction is permanent. Even when their senses can't perceive Jesus' presence their conviction of his renewed life with them sends them back seven miles to where they came from- to Jerusalem. In Robert MacAfee Brown's words, “Before, they were behind locked doors, saving their necks. Now they are about to start going all over the Roman Empire, putting their necks on the line every day.”

Our five senses are gifts from God, and help us understand and perceive reality. But there is a sixth sense that points out spiritual realities. That is also a gift from God, and for it to function I need to do two things:

THINK about sacred stories, about what they teach me, as I reflect on my own life-
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DO things God calls me to do, like inviting people into my home and my life and sharing food with others.

When we DO these things we will discover that God is REAL. God is HERE, and GOD is NOW in our midst.

There is an experience that can have a powerful impact on us in discovering that God is REAL, GOD is HERE and GOD is NOW in our midst, just as those travelers to Emmaus did. It's a three day retreat called the WALK TO EMMAUS. Both my husband and I have experienced this retreat as have many people in our congregation. Two of them have agreed to say a few words about their experience today. There will be a table in Baker Hall where you can find out more and pick up information to take with you.

Jack Markwick & Jan McPeak were invited to share. **Jan's words follow:**

I have been a confessed Christian since I was 9 years old when I chose to be baptized and accept Christ as my savior. So I have been on a faith journey for a long time.

About 5 years ago God decided that I needed help with His plan for me. So He sent to me one of His disciples, named Howard Wallin. Howard came to our home to talk with Val and I about going on the Walk to Emmaus.

We thanked him for coming and said that we would consider his suggestion. Well, I think we filed the application he gave us in that well-known circular file and considered that to be the end of **THAT** conversation.

But, the Lord never gives up on us and He sent Howard to us one more time. I explained that we had “lost” the application and of course, Howard pulled a new application from his coat pocket and said, “No problem, here’s another one.”

Well, we gave some other explanation of being Waaay Toooo Busy! I knew that I was way too important to my company to be “out of pocket” for 3 days!!!! It wasn’t a good time, etc., etc, etc. We thought Howard was satisfied with all those answers or maybe I should be honest and say, excuses. Because he left without our agreement to come and see The Walk to Emmaus.

However, the Lord sent Howard one more time..... The Lord is so persistent and so faithful and so wants a close relationship with us. This time, we could not come up with one more lame excuse and we both filled out the application and before we knew it we were enrolled in the next walks.

Val went on his walk about a week before I did. Since my job took me out of town almost every week, I was home only one day with Val before I went on my walk. I could already tell that something had changed in him. But he didn’t want my walk to be effected by his experience. He wanted me to have my own experience, knowing that I was in a different place on my faith journey than he was. So he was reluctant to share much with me before I left for my weekend.

So off I went to the retreat – my sponsors took away my watch, my cell phone, and checked to make sure I did not bring my computer. What had I gotten myself into? What kind of craziness was I heading to? No watch, no cell phone, no computer! It was the same as cutting off my arms & legs! What was this?

Well.... As I eventually discovered, I was heading toward a closer relationship to Jesus. Not just a faith journey, but walking with Jesus on the same path, not on a path near Jesus, but **THE PATH** with Jesus at my side!

Emmaus opened my eyes and filled my heart with the Holy Spirit.

Leaving my Emmaus weekend, I realized that I had been worshiping earthy gods, not my Heavenly Father. I had been spending all my time chasing bigger salaries, but with every promotion and every big salary increase, I had become more unhappy. My life both personal and professional was unfulfilling. I was **UNHAPPY** with a capital **UN**.

I knew that I needed to make a change. I prayed for months and God kept giving me the same answer. And I would argue with Him because I thought the solution would be painful.

But I finally let God be in charge! The change involved quitting my well-paying job, but God provided work at this church – not high paying, but it provides enough. It involved selling our large home, moving into a smaller town-home that has become my favorite home I have ever had. Selling my big car, a Cadillac Deville and buying a Volkswagon convertible– but oh, how much fun I have had with that little red car!!!!

The Walk To Emmaus changed the path of my life. I know from my experience that your life, would be changed. Not by selling your house, car, giving up your well-paying job, but God has a plan for each one of us and He knows the plan for you. I would encourage everyone here to consider where you are on your faith journey and answer this question: are you on a journey or are you on a path with Jesus at your side?

I would also invite you to Come and see at *The Walk to Emmaus*.

We do not need to leave the physical world, what we often think of as the **REAL WORLD**, in order to discover spiritual realities. We don't need to move to another psychic plane or have out of body experiences. God shows us his **REAL** presence right in the middle of the physical world..... I might say **ESPECIALLY** in the middle of the physical world..... in things like sharing food and drink, gathering around a table or a fire, talking, telling stories, caring for others. Our sacraments teach this also: we baptize with **WATER**, which is the most common substance on the face of the earth and is by far the most important substance in the composition

of our bodies. We share the Lord's Supper with juice from Jewel and bread from a bakery in town.

If someone came in right now and said, "Who's here today?" We might start listing names or just say, "There's nobody here but us Baker Church folks." Our Gospel tells us, "THINK AGAIN! LOOK AGAIN!" Because there are unseen realities here—but not like the scary cartoon ghosts. The RISEN CHRIST IS HERE. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS HERE. THE CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE IS HERE. We are not alone. This isn't a Sci-Fi movie promotion. It is the proclamation of our faith. We are not alone. We will never be alone. Amen.