

Easter

21 April 2019

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

**Matthew 28: 5-15**

**This Is Real!**



The Empty Tomb, Sermon Central Media, artist unknown

On Thursday night this week we remembered the events of the Last Supper, celebrating communion together in the Upper Room just across the way there in a converted Zimmerman

Hall. We recessed to the Garden of Gethsemane, usually known to us as the Amphitheater, and there we read the Word of God, experienced music (instrumental, choral and, if you were listening intently, birdsongs that erupted in response to the violin). There was implicitly shared memory and faith: the two essentials of the original Passover meal and festival. Maundy Thursday and Passover have always focused on assurances about shared history, with the goal of ensuring that the activity of God in history continues to be remembered...passed on and on from generation to generation. Four questions are asked at Seder meals in Jewish tradition... questions, the answers to which explain why certain foods and rituals are observed each time. It is an effort to ensure that people do not forget what God has done in the past...especially in God's being the Creator of all things, and God's being the Liberator of all things toward a future of hope. Creation and freedom are the points of Passover/Seder experiences, and God's commitment to those in our past must be retained.

On Good Friday we focused upon the hope wrought from that freedom as Jesus is crucified, buried and resurrected. The hope points us in the direction of the future...our own, that of those we love, and that of the world...liberated from past bondage (like the Hebrew slaves in Egypt led by Moses) in order to anticipate and expect a future filled with this hope by the grace of God...past to future.

This movement from past to future is facilitated by Jesus' new commandment given at the Last Supper: the commandment that we love one another; indeed love others as much as and even more than ourselves...and that we devote ourselves to service in the name of that love. A new author, actually a member here at Woods Church, Dylan Roche, has just published a book entitled, *The Purple Bird*. In it the main character goes on a fantastic adventure in the quest to help a non-human friend become human/become real. It is a daunting task but when, at last, that is accomplished, we learn that the change came about, not because of personal actions or great intelligence, but because of love...a good lesson for us here in Severna Park with our high expectations for achievement and accomplishment. The fairy-like wise-woman explains:

“Only by proving himself kind, brave, and honest, of good will and noble action, pure of heart, self-controlled, both humble and merciful, and, most importantly, selfless and able

to love others as he would love himself—only then (was) he granted a (human) body and soul.”

Love, the same facilitator that moves us from past to future, facilitates the friends becoming real and the individuals in the story are made aware of that.

We bring that kind of awareness concerning our faith to this Easter Sunday morning. And we are here today perhaps wondering, “What now?” How does our faith past which escorts us here this morning jive with a faith future that promises us things like eternal life and resurrection? Some of you may have been escorted here by a faith past that prompts you to come to church on Easter because that’s what you always did as a kid or because, like many people, there’s a subtle investment in the future that “someday” there will be more time to get to church, get involved, and so on. And, of course and after all, we all are committed to going to Heaven when the time comes in the future. Some of you are here because you are always here...In either case, we are glad that you are. But that question really resonates, “What now?”

I am currently engrossed in a Netflix series called “Life Below 0.” Some of you may know it. Four or five individuals and/or families have chosen to live far into Alaska and practice subsistence living (which means they rely entirely upon themselves, the area’s resources and their survival skills). I don’t enjoy the hunting pieces of the show...preferring to go to Safeway or Giant and pretend the steaks just kind of appear out of nowhere...but there is one person in particular who intrigues me. Her name is Sue, and she lives alone 192 miles north of the Arctic Circle where, for nine months out of the year she encounters nobody except the foxes and the 83 grizzlies that live in the area. Her closest neighbor is 300 miles away. Sue is full of basic wisdom about life...some humorous and some simply true. For example, she advocates constant vigilance of your surroundings, otherwise you may end up becoming a pork chop. But in a more profound moment, she explains life this way: “Some people have one foot in the past and one foot in the future. Which means that they are not here...you need to have both feet in the present, because this is where you are today.”

And this is where *we* are today. Here. Easter Sunday. Whatever past launched us here, here we are. Both feet in the present. Easter, 2019. And this is real.

You remember the Velveteen Rabbit...here is a portion of it:

“The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.”

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

"What is real?" and "What now?" These are closely related questions. We are gathered together now in the present from a variety of pasts and we are all looking forward to different futures. But we claim a common past and a common future through our faith...small and even perhaps tentative faith or large and even perhaps confident faith as the case may be. How is this possible...all these different feet in the present at the same time? I believe that the Skin Horse is right: it is love that makes us real, and it is love that gifts us with a sense of ourselves and allows us to come together, diverse as we might be. It is love that forms us and love that changes us. And we have been made real through the love of Jesus Christ.

The Matthew text we read today speaks to such love...God's love for us demonstrated in this Easter story that points to the past and to the future at the same time. The text tells us the familiar story...tells us the story of the empty tomb, and the women's surprise in finding it that way, and the angel who declares, effectively, that Jesus has risen. The other gospel writers, Mark, Luke, and John, also tell the familiar story, but Matthew includes an additional fact that the others do not. In so doing he lets us know that we ourselves are the biggest obstacle to becoming real, because we are fearful of losing control of our lives. He tells us that the Roman soldiers were coerced and bribed into making up an explanation about how and why the stone was rolled away and, therefore, why Jesus' body was not in place where they had left it. Simply, they said Jesus' followers had done it; stolen his body to make it look like Jesus had risen. And, therefore, that his rising is not real.

There are multiple commentaries and pages of argument about all this, including the absurdity of the soldiers being so soundly asleep that they missed the huge stone's being rolled away right under their noses (not exactly a quiet enterprise), and the lack of explanation for the earthquake

(an historical reality), and so on. I urge you to research it if you are one who would benefit from detailed understanding on this.

But for us today I think we must conclude that things are exactly what they appear to be...unless we want to be convinced otherwise. And then we can deny reality in spite of the evidence and logic right in front of us. The human capacity for denial is an amazing ability, like my denial at the grocery store meat counter. We believe what is comfortable and easy for us to believe; but belief is always a matter of faith, especially when it is love-based and not evidence-based, or logical, or rational. It does not require proof but builds its foundation on love...and the commandment to love one another. At that point, truth operates in the service of love, and flounders when it must function in the service of selfishness.

In the Matthew text the chief priests chose self-interest over truth. The evidence about Jesus was right before them. It had always been before them. They knew that Jesus had healed blind, deaf, and lame people. They knew he'd fed five thousand with a small boy's lunch. They knew he'd raised back to life the daughter of a synagogue leader called Jairus. They knew he'd called a man named Lazarus, dead in his tomb for four days, to come out, and everyone saw he was alive. And now they knew that the disciples had not stolen the body, but an angel from God had rolled the stone away and pronounced that Jesus had been raised.

They knew... but chose a lie instead of the truth, because the truth was not easy.

That must not be our choice today. Not the choice of those of us with both feet in the present where we long to be real. It is our choice to make love and service our reality. It is our choice not to come up with excuses and explanations for why we cannot be real. And that choice may fly in the face of all the evidence around us but if we believe what our faith tells us, it is real.

I hope today that we discover what is real and true about ourselves and our faith. That we may choose today to live out the truth of God's love for us in our lives rather than living out the reality of our self-interest as the chief priests chose to do.

We believe Jesus has saved us from our sins and ourselves.

We believe God raised him from the dead and he is with us always.

We believe his Spirit lives in us, and by his Spirit, even we may do great things.

We believe he is the Savior for all people, and therefore all must know about him.

We believe he is coming again, and we must be ready for his return and be urgent in all he gives us to do before his return.

We believe all this and much more. This is truth.

Any time I know what's true, but think or act differently, I too have chosen a lie rather than the truth just like the chief priests of Jesus' time.

“Live what you believe,” we often tell ourselves, for truth is not an optional extra, nor a commodity to be owned when convenient and set aside when inconvenient.

Jesus is risen. He is really risen. We believe that, and therefore we must live what we believe. This is what’s real. It’s been proven in the past and promised in our future.

And the good news is that once you become real you can’t become unreal again. No matter how hurt you’ve been, how deeply wounded you feel, or how much grief and mourning from death and/or loss surrounds you, God pronounced us real through the love of Jesus Christ. Be challenged this Easter to align what is real and true about yourself with what’s real and true in your world/in your life. Thanks be to God THIS is real!

Amen.