



April 11, 2010

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

Reading: John 20: 19-31

“Getting Real”

Several years ago, Memorex ran a commercial on TV in which Ella Fitzgerald’s voice was heard singing so loudly that she broke a glass. The twist was that it wasn’t actually Ella’s live voice that broke the glass, it was the sound of her voice coming from a Memorex cassette tape. The commercial ended with the question “is it real, or is it Memorex?”

Fast forward a few years, and in today’s world, it’s not just a reproduction of a person’s voice that leaves us asking the question “is it real?” it’s the reproduction of the entire person in the form of a hologram.

Three years ago, American Idol did just that when they produced a hologram of Elvis Presley singing live on stage with Celine Dion. (show youtube clip)

It’s thought that within the next 20 years this technology will be so commonplace that instead of teleconferencing or webcamming at work or at home, we will be hologramming with each other. So, in 20 years when your minister goes on sabbatical, you won’t have to hire someone to replace them, they can just hologram themselves into the pulpit while they’re away.

This may all be fine and well, you might say, but it isn’t the same as experiencing the real thing is it? Which, of course, begs the question, just what is it that makes something real?

That’s the question that seems to be on Thomas’ mind when we encounter him in this morning’s scripture reading. Is it really Jesus who his friends claim to have seen the previous week? Is it really Jesus who he sees standing in front of him now? Is Jesus real? Is Easter real? Is resurrection real?

For Thomas, his curiosity will only be satisfied by human touch, by a face to face encounter, by empirical evidence. So the Risen Christ holds out his wounded hands and points to his pierced side and says “put your fingers here, see and touch.” And without ever actually doing the touching, at least not that we’re told of in the story, Thomas suddenly believes. He is real. This is really happening. The invitation and the honoring of his questioning, seems to be enough. The relationship he has with the Risen One seems to be enough.

In the story “The Velveteen Rabbit” a young boy receives a small velveteen rabbit for Christmas. The Rabbit is soon forgotten among the Christmas excitement, but eventually he is put the nursery where he gets to know the other toys. He soon notices that the mechanical toys feel superior to the other toys and pretend to be real because they have springs and can move. But the Rabbit, who like Thomas, is curious about what actually does makes something real, decides to ask the Skin Horse, who was the oldest and wisest toy, just what makes something real.

“Real isn’t how you’re made,” says the Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, then you become real.”

In other words, being real is about being in relationship.

If we were to ask the people that were in the audience the night that Elvis sang on stage with Celine Dion whether or not seeing him up there was a real experience or not, I have no doubt in my mind that they would tell us it was real alright. I’m sure they would tell us you could feel the love. Because after all, who doesn’t love Elvis? Elvis has been dead for over 30 years, but we can still relate to him and his music.

If we closed our eyes, even the Memorex tape of Ella Fitzgerald breaking the glass might feel like the real deal, if we were true lovers of jazz and Ella’s voice. I never heard Ella Fitzgerald sing live in my life, but I can remember driving along in my car one day and hearing the news on the radio that she had died. The tears I shed in my car that day were definitely real. I obviously had a relationship with her that was stronger than I had ever realized.

The question about whether or not Jesus really rose from the dead and whether he is really alive today has nothing to do with whether we can reach out and touch his physical presence or whether or not anyone at any time could have done so. Whether Jesus is real has nothing to do with his body and whether or not we can literally touch and feel his wounds. It has everything to do with our relationship with his spiritual presence, his living presence.

Jesus is made real for us, Christ is made real for us, when we experience the life that was in him blowing through our own lives; when we experience the peace that was in him emanating from our own lives; and when we experience the grace and compassion that was in him, touching our own lives and flowing through our lives out into the world.

In the biblical stories that try to communicate what it was that happened after Jesus died, that made his presence so real to his followers, and let’s not forget that they are just stories, all the encounters with the Risen Christ come when his followers are at their lowest. He appears when they are hiding behind closed doors filled with fear; when they are grieving; when they have given up hope and gone back to their former ways; when they are full of disbelief; alienated from one another; in short when they are vulnerable and in need.

And in every one of these encounters, he comes unbidden. He breaks through their locked doors, he suddenly appears on a road, or in a garden or on a mountain.

For many of us, our own experiences of the Risen One are just like that. We hit a low point and we wonder how we’re going to make it through, and suddenly there’s someone there who speaks a word of comfort, or offers us a feeling of grace. Or somehow, we don’t know how, our thoughts clear and we’re guided in the right direction; or we read something that gives us a

sense of peace; or we hear something that brings us healing; or we're touched in such a way that we find forgiveness; or we find courage we thought we'd never have.

And in the moment, we might not even think to name that experience as an encounter with the Christ presence, but isn't that what all encounters with grace and peace and comfort and renewing life are really all about? Encounters with the same spirit, the same essence that is the Risen Christ made real in our day and our time?

Some of you may have heard about the phenomenon called Caesar's Breath. It's science's way of reminding us that energy never dies or disappears. Since we all share the same molecules in our atmosphere the theory is that the molecules of Julius Caesar's breath, from over 2,000 years ago, are still in our atmosphere today. They have scattered around the globe and we are breathing them with every breath we take.

I don't so much care myself about whether or not I'm breathing in Caesar's breath today, but I do like the thought of breathing in the same breath that Jesus breathed into his disciples, the same resurrecting power, the same spirit of peace.

Maybe that's why when we just take a moment to breathe, we become more calm, life becomes more real, we're able to be more present.

It makes me realize that although our most powerful encounters with the Christ presence may happen when the Risen One appears unbidden, breaking through our locked doors as it were, we can also avail ourselves of that life-giving presence in just about any place and any time by simply breathing in the goodness of the one whose very essence is love, reminding ourselves of the relationship that is ours to nurture and claim.

That is, in part, what we did this morning when we baptized Bobby and when we welcomed Brenda, Bonnie, Janice and Laura into our midst, we breathed in goodness and grace and reminded ourselves of the love that calls us here.

It is, in part what I plan to do on my sabbatical for the next four months: avail myself of the Risen One who breathes new life into weary souls like mine.

I hope it is what you will do in the next four months while I am away: avail yourselves of fresh new perspectives; avail yourselves of the support of one another; avail yourselves of the ongoing presence of the One whose life and love is very real and very alive in this place in plain and ordinary and surprising and wonderful ways.