

"When Love Makes Us Real"

Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 20, 2014 -- Easter Sunday -- Rev. Ronald Botts

Some years ago Margery Williams wrote a children's story about a stuffed toy and a little boy called *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The rabbit lived in the nursery and talked to the other toys when people weren't around.

Some toys felt quite superior and boasted they were real because they had springs and could move. So one day Rabbit asked the Skin Horse, the oldest and wisest among the toys "What is real?"

"Real isn't how you're made," said the Horse, "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time then you become real."

The Horse also said not to expect this to come quickly. Often when you're worn out and bedraggled, that's when you become real.

This story, loved by both children and adults, raises an interesting question about what's real and what isn't. Now on the surface there wouldn't seem to be any doubt about this. A rock isn't alive, but a dog is. A lake has actual water, but a mirage only contains the imaginary sort. Something is or it isn't and that's all there is to it. Or so it would seem.

During the Korean War a ship of the Royal Canadian Navy once rescued 19 survivors from a vessel that had been sunk by Communist guns. The captain notified the ship's surgeon to stand by as the injured were brought on board. All had wounds, and several were severe.

A pounding storm rolled the ship all night as the doctor worked feverishly over the survivors. Despite fifteen foot waves that buffeted the ship, the surgeon cleaned, cut, extracted, sutured, and bandaged. He removed a bullet lodged within an inch of one man's heart; shrapnel from the abdomen of another, and dealt with a collapsed lung in a third. Going without sleep or rest, this committed physician worked throughout the night. In the end all 19 men were transferred safely to an evacuation ship the next morning.

The Canadian ship, the *Cayuga*, remained off the Korean coast for some months. Whenever they put into port, the ship's doctor toured the war-torn villages of the countryside. He delivered babies, gave advice on nutrition, responded to injuries of all kinds, and amputated damaged limbs that would have otherwise proved fatal. It's the kind of heroic action that often takes place in the aftermath of battle, but which usually goes unnoticed.

What changed this situation into something else was a journalist who decided to write about the exploits of this particular Navy doctor. I say it changed things because not long after the articles ran, a physician from rural New Brunswick contacted the War Office. He told them that both the name and background of this hero were the same as his.

In the course of an investigation it was discovered that this doctor—a popular and respected officer—wasn't at all who he was thought to be. In fact, he was neither Canadian nor a doctor. All his documents were false.

People had trusted him and believed in him. He had provided appropriate treatment to hundreds of sick and injured, and was responsible for saving scores of lives. Yet, he wasn't a real doctor at all. Or was he? The line blurs sometimes between the real and the not-so-real, the absolute and the maybe.

In our Gospel today this fine line gets called into question once again. It is Sunday morning and Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. The last time she saw Jesus he had been hung on a cross to die. All hope seemed to die there with him in the hot afternoon sun.

Mary comes to the garden cave where he had been taken, but she finds it empty. So she runs back to get Peter and another of the disciples but, upon seeing the empty place for themselves, they can only confirm what she already knows. They leave, but Mary stays behind in the garden. She begins to cry for fear that enemies have removed the body and desecrated it in an attempt to further destroy Jesus' influence among the people.

Suddenly she turns and she sees someone behind her. She doesn't recognize the figure, but assumes that it must be the gardener already about his duties. The stranger asks, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Mary replies tearfully, "Sir, if you have taken him away, please tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Whereupon the voice of the other becomes warm and intimate and he whispers, "Mary."

"Rabbouni, [Teacher]," she replies.

The scriptures tell us that Mary returns quickly to the disciples and witnesses. "I have seen the Lord. [I have seen him!]"

Where does the real, and only what is imagined, intersect? How far does the one go before it crosses over into the other? Who was it that Mary met in the garden? Was Jesus as real now after his death as he had been before? Could it be that he was even **more** real?

Consider this: I cannot prove that someone loves me but, if I know that person well enough, I can attest to it without hesitation or doubt. Or a fellow might tell me that his girl is the most beautiful woman in the world, but when I meet her I am surprised by her plainness. Where does reality leave off and imagination begin? What's real and what isn't?

And for that matter, what makes us real? Is it a birth certificate which documents our existence? Is it the image that stares back at us in the mirror? Is it a pocketful of credit cards that allows us to make purchases in a certain, familiar name? Is it the blood that spills out when you cut your hand? Or is it when a little one looks up at you and calls, "Mommy" or "Daddy?"

Easter Day is generally considered the most joyous time of the Christian year, yet it is also filled with questions. For some of us now there even may be some reticence to celebrate with abandon, some uneasiness in affirming what our hymns profess so unflinchingly. Despite all the flowers and litanies and prayers and people dressed in their newest and best, there may be a gnawing question that some of us hear and can't quite dismiss: Is it all real? Is it?

Now if that's you, know that you have company. To wonder about something so mysterious as death and resurrection is not an indication of waning faith, but an acknowledgment that the human mind has trouble contemplating such a singular and inexplicable act.

True faith always starts from an honest meeting of teaching and tradition with the experience of life as we know it. While absolute proof of things spiritual is impossible, that doesn't mean they aren't true. Who was it that Mary Magdalene met in the garden that day? For her, there was likely no question at all. For me, there's no doubt either, though don't ask me to explain it. Some things, like love, we just know. The proof is in the heart and not in the mind.

So this brings us back full circle to that elusive question of what is real, or in the probing query of the Rabbit, when in life do we become most real? When do we become most fully human, most awake and

aware of life in all its possibilities? Where is it that we can suspend what we commonly accept as real for an uncertainty we just know is true? When? Where? In the profound words of the Skin Horse: "It happens to us when we've been loved a long, long time."

Easter is the story of the resurrection, but it's more than that. It's a story of how much we are loved—how God cares for us before we even take our first breath and loves us up to the day we die, and even beyond. that. Saying this, however, won't necessarily make any significant difference in your life. You have to personally realize it and allow yourself to be loved. You have to accept and experience the heavenly gift.

Today, more than any other day, Jesus shows us this boundless love. He lets us know that even if we are worn out and shabby and tired and old, we are cared for beyond our imagining—and that is what truly makes us real. This is what gives us joy and purpose with every rising of the sun. It makes a good day great and a challenging one bearable.

You see, Easter celebrates life renewed, but more than what we thought we came to acknowledge. Easter celebrates life renewed, not only of Jesus our Savior, but in a most personal and profound way, **our** life made new as well.