

1 Peter 1: 3-9
John 20: 19-31
April 27, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

At the end of her poem about the God she needs as opposed to the god she is told to believe in, Selima Hill writes: “Please can I have a God who is... not the dog, but the joyful exuberance when I come home.”

I like this image. It invites me to locate God in a mutually shared experience. The experience of God is something that *happens; and happens in relationship*. God is not an abstract concept separate from human experience. God is not to be discovered in human statements about God as found in creeds and theology books. Indeed God is not to be found in any particular being or thing in isolation. We identify God in the experience of relating to particular beings and things. When we walk in the woods or by a lake; when we sit quietly in the soft light of an early summer evening—by ourselves or in the company of another and feel peace and contentment, this is an experience of God. When we are touched by the kindness of another, or the pain of a child and are moved to compassion we are experiencing God.

When words about God are meaningful in scripture or an historic confession of belief, it is because the words awaken an inner experience in which we become aware of the vast yet intimately personal experience of a Life that is greater than any *one* life. We awaken to a Life from which we have come, unto whom we will return and in whom we live and move and have our being. The same is true of music, dance, drama, poetry and visual arts. The spiritual experience is not simply in the ink on the page or the paint on the canvass; it is not in the script or the graceful movement of a body. Spiritual experience is the result of an encounter. Without someone to look, a painting is so much paint on a canvass. Without instruments and an audience,

music is just a series of notes on a page—the same for books, plays, poems, movies, forests and seashores. In order for creation to come alive somebody has to show up. In the meeting, we experience God.

I propose that this dynamic gives us insight to the disciples' experience of Jesus' resurrection. The women disciples come to the tomb. It is empty. They are completely disoriented by this experience. Their encounter with the empty tomb is a real life experience. As scientists studying the energy in the universe are continually finding, there is no such thing as *nothing*. "Empty" space is never truly empty. Space itself is a form of *presence*. Take a moment and become aware of where you are. Try to attend to the space in the sanctuary. There is far more space than there are walls and pews and windows and ceilings. Indeed the most present "thing" where we are is *light!*

What is true of the physical presence of space is also true of silence. Silence is not merely the absence of sound. It is the setting which makes sound heard. Take a moment and attend to the silence which surrounds the sound of birds, passing cars, the silence that intervenes in between... the... words... I ...speak. Do you not experience *something?*

The tomb was not empty in the sense of there being nothing present. It was full, cram-full of what had just happened. Imagine the energy which must have continued to buzz in that so-called empty, silent space! No wonder the women were rocked to the core of their being! No wonder that in some accounts the earth shook! No wonder they experienced the presence of what they later described as heavenly beings! To borrow from the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the tomb was "crammed with heaven!"

Then comes another encounter. A voice is heard. Not just any voice; a voice which leaps over the great chasm from past to present; and even more profoundly, is a lively spark which

jumps across the impassable gap from death to life! The experience is total. The women do not step back and analyze the situation. They experience in sight sound and touch the very real presence Jesus.

I suggest that the experience is not simply one way. Jesus could have walked around Jerusalem completely unnoticed by most people; to the extent that they knew of him or had seen him the figure might have stirred a thought or a “Look, Martha! Doesn’t that man look like that Jesus fellow who was crucified the other day?” But of course, it couldn’t be Jesus. Jesus is dead.

But when he presents himself to the women disciples there is mutual recognition. There is a deep connection. There is a response from the women which, I propose *creates the resurrection event*. In theological terms we call it faith. Faith is a willingness and expectation to meet Jesus in the here and now. As the writer of the book of Hebrews states, faith is the “assurance of what we hope for, the conviction of what we do not see.” Faith is the trust, against all material evidence and rational logic that *God is*. And so by faith we are oriented to look for and experience God right here in the land of the living.

When the generation of eyewitnesses to the life death and resurrection of Jesus was dying the great question facing the remaining believers was this: how will the faith which leapt across the chasm between death and life make the same leap to a new generation? This new generation, like Thomas will not have “been there”. They will have no firsthand experience of meeting Jesus alive from the dead. Like Thomas, and indeed all of the men disciples, they will not be satisfied with the word of another person. They will want some proof, some evidence. How will this happen if Jesus is not there to appear in person? Thus Jesus speaks to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

I propose that what prompts Thomas' confession is the outcome of an authentic real life encounter with Jesus. It is much more than a conversion based on the material evidence of Jesus standing before him. It is the dynamic transformation of the meeting of a soul willing to believe, open to a relationship with the Life that embraces all life that brings Thomas to his knees confessing, "My Lord and my God!"

For two thousand years the spark of the resurrection power of God's raising Jesus from the dead has been leaping the generations. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit which sees to it that people continue to meet Jesus and be transformed by the encounter. And it has never been more important than in this present age that we seek to be a community which conducts the energy of Christ's resurrection to a world that is increasingly ignorant of God or the message of the life that really is life.

Yet how are we to this? Do we do as some people and confront people with the message? Do we go to evangelism seminars to learn techniques for bringing people to faith? For some of us that may indeed be our path. But even the best technique in the world will fall flat if it is not empowered by our own ongoing relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is what Peter calls our "living hope" that sends the spark of life from our soul to that of another. To me and I hope to you this is incredibly GOOD NEWS. We don't have to speak with human tongues or the tongues of angels. We have only to open our own hearts to the way, the truth and the life of Jesus. The rest is up to God. It is not important to preach the Gospel. It is important, out of our daily walk with the Lord, to *be* Good News. Amen.