

Desperately Wanting to Believe

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 8, 2011, The Fourth Sunday of Easter.
Based on Luke 24:13-35.*

In talking about sermon possibilities this week, a wise priest friend of mine jokingly—I hope jokingly—told me that the real challenge this morning is to give a sermon that encompasses both Osama bin Laden and Mother's Day. Though not a rocket scientist, I am smart enough not to tackle those subjects! We are going to spend a long time parsing what both the life and death of bin Laden means to us; and being the son of a 93-year-old mother, I know this still to be true: at whatever age, mothers rock our worlds in wonderful and complicated ways that far exceed the scope of a short Sunday sermon.

Besides, it is still Easter; that ought to be enough sermon fodder for a month of Sundays. Easter is a season, not just a day—at least that is what we claim in the church. But it is a hard sell. Everyone in the world knows that the chocolate Easter bunnies at Duane Reade have been 60% off for two weeks. That is an Easter fact to which I can bear personal witness!

Today we read the familiar story of a dramatic encounter on the road to Emmaus, a no longer existent village near Jerusalem. I have heard the story and sermons about it all my life; and, yet, it still evokes deep emotions within me. Even the word itself is evocative; it means "warm spring," eliciting images of comfort and rest. The story itself has all the intellectual problems present in each of the post-resurrection accounts: how can this be, must we really believe that Jesus darted about in some ethereal state, here one second, gone the next? Of course, we want to know. And, yet, there is something so exquisitely tender about this story, regardless of whether it is true, that it always invites me to believe, to find some way to believe.

One of my favorite moments in it occurs when the followers of Jesus still have not realized with whom they are speaking. As they approach Emmaus, they realize that he is about to leave, that he is about to depart from them. Not knowing the full story but knowing enough, they say to him, "Stay with us for it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." Perhaps they should have known who he was by this time, but they didn't. Characteristically, they were a bit slow on the uptake, but they got enough to know they wanted more. I am often a lot like that. Even when belief feels much like a sham, when the light is fading and I can feel the darkness coming, I know I want more. And at such moments, I remember this story, and I take great comfort from it. Jesus didn't require that they get it or buy it all; he just stayed. I like that. In another gospel story, Jesus is recorded to have said, "I will be with you forever even until the end of the earth." I like that, too.

Last week in the Rector's Forum we had a fascinating conversation about resurrection, about what we believe about it and how the idea of it affects our lives. As you would expect of a St. Bart's gathering, there was a wide range of opinion and experience. Recalling that conversation as I prepared this sermon, I was drawn to a phrase that makes it all clearer for me. Perhaps it will for you. In Jesus' response to the disciples' telling about recent events, he says to them, "You are so slow of heart to believe." A light bulb went on when I read those very familiar words, and I was struck with a thought I have never had before. I have been trying to believe with the wrong organ. The way to believe in Christ is to believe with my heart, not my head. That doesn't mean that I suspend the intelligence God has given me—far from that. In fact, it means that I use that intelligence to understand what kind of believing is required in matters of the soul.

Believing has nothing to do with whether or not something "really happened." Believing with my heart means that it is really happening now! I know that Christ is risen because I believe it in my heart, because it happens again and again in my heart. Do you remember what the fox tells the Little Prince, "One sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye"? He might also have said, for I believe it to be the same truth, "One believes clearly only with the heart. What is essential is believed only in the heart."

My grandchildren, twins 7 and their brother 5, believe like that: they believe with their heart. Always when I am about to leave, one of them will say, “Granddaddy, I don’t want you to go.” I of course reply that I don’t want to go either, and essentially I really mean it, though they do put me through the paces while I am there! Invariably, though, I add, “I’ll be back.” And it is enough for them because they believe with their hearts. Their heads could tell them that something could keep me from coming back. Planes crash, people have sudden heart attacks, fools step off curbs while texting: these things happen. But they know I will be back because they believe with their hearts; and even if the unlikely occurred and something kept me from coming back physically, they would keep believing. Because as long they remember and love, they can always bring me back, for I exist in their hearts, just as they do in mine, just as we do in the heart of God.

Believing with our hearts is what keeps the church alive because that kind of belief changes people. Precise doctrines believed even passionately in the head rarely do. Last week we hosted a gathering of the Landmarks Conservancy in a series of programs called Sacred Sites. David Lowe took us on a virtual tour of some of the great sacred spaces in NYC, including this one, remarking again and again about the power of these churches and synagogues to speak at a level that is much deeper than just the brain-level. Though he didn’t say it precisely, what he meant is that these spaces, and others equally grand and many much less so, invite us to believe with our hearts. Of course, we know that this space is the genius of marble and mosaic and pipes and wood, all conceived and configured with magnificent intelligence and skill; but in our hearts we believe that the space transcends all of that, bringing us in fact to God.

It is the primacy of holy space that brings me to my last point. As sacramental people, what we do here every week matters. The disciples finally recognized Jesus when? In the breaking of the bread. The witness of the church is that God is particularly present around this table and tables like it throughout the world. Does the table generally, or this particular version of the practice, contain God, meaning that God is only here? Of course not: no one religion or one practice singularly contains God. But make no mistake about it: we believe that it is in this principle act of worship that we—making claims only for ourselves—experience the presence of God in a particular and special way. We know God, we find God, we experience God in the breaking of this bread not because priests have magic words or because we are pious and proper believers but because faithful people, using the prayers and tradition of the church, gather together, seeking what we know to be beyond us, offering our gifts, our souls and bodies to God. And in that process, always imperfectly and never a *fait accompli* but a lifelong process of ups and downs, we are changed, made new, filled with God’s spirit.

That is why going to church is important, and we need never to forget that. Going to church is important not because it punches our cosmic ticket or serves as a talisman to ward off bad luck or makes God love us more. It is important, even critical, because it is here around this table that we find God in ways we don’t find God anywhere else. Of course, we are people on the move; being here on Sunday mornings is not always possible and (let’s be honest) it is not always what we desire. I get that and I accept it, but I, as one of your priests, am remiss if I do not add this. With all my heart I believe that if we, in our tradition—I am not talking about others—if we intend to find and know God, our 2000-year tradition tells us that we will know God in the breaking of the bread. So come to church; and if you are away, go wherever you are; if you are busy on Sunday, come during the week. Our salvation does not depend on it—God has taken care of that—but our lives do. Living without it is really not living.

Lord, may we be quick of heart to believe.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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