



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: May 1, 2011

Feeling, Seeing, Smelling, Hearing and Tasting Easter, Shannon A. White

John 20:19-31

I had a conversation with a concerned friend this week who told me about another friend who has recently left her Presbyterian roots to become a Jehovah's Witness. The person was anxious as she asked me to pray for this other relative..."She went from believing in life after death to believing nothing happens after death in one instant" she said... Hmmm. I replied. "I doubt that shift in belief happened in one instant," I said. Turns out, after we talked a little more, this relative had been drawn to the caring community of the Jehovah's Witnesses which she had encountered. She had experienced a new kind of faith because she was cared for by an interested community which held her questions and doubts and gave her a new experience of faith which was more compelling to her than what she had experienced in the past. Hmmm.

We all long for deep experiences which will connect us to what matters and to what's real. Marketing professionals know that as well. I was doing some browsing in the bookstore the other day and came across a book which detailed why Steve Jobs makes such memorable presentations. The author said the reason was, Jobs doesn't sell computer technology...he sells an experience...he invites others into an experience of technology which has been described as sleek and Zen during his presentations when he has unveiled Apple's new products. And the response? People can't resist...

Growing churches give people an experience as well. They provide an opening for people to have an experience with the living God in their midst...In worship: through our reflections on the music, through prayer, through the sermon, through interactions with each other...through the entire tone of the service; In education: through providing opportunities for people to struggle and wrestle with new frontiers of faith...stretching them to grow out of their comfort zones and see more of God; In service: through meeting God in the "other" by interacting "with the least of these" as Jesus taught...giving of oneself completely and speaking of the good news that new life is possible through the love of God; In community: through interactions with each other as fallible but beloved children of God who together make up the whole face of God. If you haven't experienced God on some level here, or anywhere else for that matter...you need to ask yourself, why? What's in the way for you?

It's always interesting to hear people respond after the Sunday service...usually those which get the highest ratings are those that touch not only the intellect, but also the spiritual and emotional as well. We are multi-dimensional...and we long to be touched deep in our souls.

It was no different for the disciples...Imagine the scene...it's been a long day since news of the empty tomb

wreaked havoc throughout the region. Lots of conversations have taken place during the day perhaps in quiet or out in the open. Exactly what happened and what does it mean? Now in the evening, the disciples still uncertain as to what has happened are hidden behind locked doors. Remember they are still trying to take in what happened to their lord, but faced with the reality that the political climate was threatening. They didn't know what the ramifications of the empty tomb would be, and they were afraid. So they hid. It probably wasn't their best moment, but there they were...fully human. Then, with no fanfare or trumpets blowing...Jesus stood among them. How did they know it? Because he said those familiar words... "Peace be with you." And THEN he showed them his hands and his side. Still caught in a daze...Jesus says it again... "Peace be with you." And then he gently breathed the Holy Spirit upon them...This is not the fiery flames we hear about at Pentecost...it was as simple as a gentle breath which one takes and relaxes just a bit deeper. Interestingly, the next instruction pointed to the things in our lives which keep us from seeing God in our midst...if you forgive the sins of others they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained.

Then Thomas is brought into the picture. He hasn't had the experience of seeing Jesus post-resurrection. He hasn't had his eyes opened. He's stuck in his logic...if I don't see it, it's not real. Then, we're told a week later, the community is together again. Even though the doors were shut...Jesus shows up once again...and utters those words once again... "Peace be with you"....you begin to see...that you know you've had an encounter with God in Christ when you experience peace...

Nevertheless...Thomas is in the spotlight once again. Jesus knows Thomas needs a different experience...he has, if you will, a different learning style...he needs to touch, see, smell to believe. My Lord and my God...instantly...Thomas is convinced.

There's nothing wrong with Thomas. He's an archetype for many of us...he's a normal human being who may get caught in his head vs. his heart. One of the beautiful things about this story, though is that we are shown that Jesus comes to US...in ways in which we need to be shown...but we need to be open.

The Sufi's had this idea right, I think...their ancient system of the Enneagram is a spiritual personality inventory which aims to keep our egos in check. They say...what is it as we are on our way to God which keeps us from seeing God....I think John is trying to get to that idea as well...what in us keeps us from fully experiencing God in our midst? What blocks us? Because it's not usually the fault of the community around us, you know...it's our attitude IN the community which keeps us from seeing God.

I reflect on that question all the time when I'm not feeling free and openhearted...when I'm stuck in blaming someone for something. One area which has plagued me from time to time throughout the years is self-righteousness...thinking I know the best way for others to be, that I'm right and others are wrong. It's not very pretty when it shows up and it disguises itself in some sneaky ways, but boy, is it powerful. I can try and convince myself that THIS TIME...I'm right. Well, this week, I was stuck in some self-righteousness in certain relationships. However, I have come to know its voice a little better now. Once I saw it and let it go...I was open again and free to love and connect in deeper ways with others. More importantly, I felt connected with God's love in a deeper way. I was peaceful.

I participated in the Landmark Forum over the last 6 months. It's been mentioned in the Wall Street Journal recently and Time magazine. They call their method "transformational learning" in that they believe you can shift in a moment's time your thinking and therefore your reality. Part of the process is making phone calls to people in your life whom you have unfinished business. This is done at breaks between sessions as well as before and after the class begins. I watched somewhat amazed...as people would return from a 20 minute break...or return in the next morning to say they had reached out to a parent, a brother or sister with whom they had not

spoken in 5, 10, and in some cases 20 or more years...and just by taking responsibility for their side of breach in relationship...either by saying “I just wanted to tell you, I love you...and I’m sorry for....., and I want you in my life....amazing stories of reconnection were made. Years of isolation and misunderstanding gone in a moment...with new possibilities for loving and living to take place.

How do you know when God is in your midst? You feel the peace which is among you. And when you don’t, you keep looking together until you see what blocks need to be lifted so that everyone can see and feel and taste and hear and smell the full experience. Community life is messy...it’s very human, we know that here at our church. But community is the way God moves in our lives today. Jesus said, “Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst.”

We’re just like the disciples. Nothing has changed...no new perspectives are held. All of the hoopla of the last week has been erased by the reality that we are the same people with the same problems we had on Good Friday. We stand in the room, crouched in fear and plagued by old ideas of how life is meant to be lived. We have our individual hopes and dreams which knock up against others. We cast our own shadows; blame others for holding opinions that are different from ours. We don’t expect our lives to be changed by the presence of God in our midst. We need new life...we need transformation...

And then Jesus comes right in the middle of us, and says.... “Peace be with you” ...do you hear it? Do you feel it? Do you smell it? Can you taste it? Can you see him...here...now?

Prayer with Scientists by Maren Tirabassi and Joan Jordan Grant

The path to believing travels through doubting, and understanding means accepting not knowing, and testing is the way to joy---even when it’s hard, long and lonely.

The inheritance of others is a story of sign pointing to a reality which is shadow and wall-walking and wonderful.

There are new galaxies and new elements. There are possible particles and species and cures. Our faith is search and research.

If I doubt enough I can put my finger inside the hole in the hand of God. If I believe enough, I will be blessed by what I cannot see or measure or touch—the experiment of the Resurrection, a hypothesis for life, and quantum holiness.

One pastor says of Thomas, “In his skepticism he represents all of us who come to faith and continue in faith with perseverance and struggle.”

We don’t have all the answers. In this lifetime, we’ll never have all of the answers. But isn’t that what makes it interesting? How boring would it be to live life knowing exactly what lies ahead? We would become lazy. Living in this one holy moment which we have...right now... let’s us trust and rely on that power which is greater than ourselves, which gives us the courage to be all that God intended us to be....to hope for transformation, to hope for more life, for more compassion, for more justice, for more mercy, for more healing, for more love... and to rest in the fact that God will continue to come to us, and find us and bring us peace...

Let us pass the peace of Christ with one another...Peace be with you...and also with you...

Pastoral Prayer

Life-giving God, we pause this morning to give you thanks for the people you send us...which make faith real to us. We come with our wounds, our fears, our doubts, and our sorrows. We come with our emptiness, our mourning, our anger, our loneliness. We come with our hopes, our faith, our pride and our joy.

We come with prayers for those who have faced devastation in the southeast as result of tornadoes this week. Families dealing with the shock and loss of loved ones, of their homes and businesses, towns now leveled, churches demolished. We ask that as the people deal with the uncertainties of these days...that your spirit of connection may bring people together in ways they have not known before. Healing divides, repairing brokenness, soothing with generosity. Even though this severe loss may be miles away from us...quicken our hearts to keep them in our prayers. Help us to remember that the circumstances of life as we know it can change in a moment...but your Spirit and presence among us remains steadfast.

On this Sunday after Easter...We come to know anew your gift of faith to us through their eyes which saw you standing with them and through their hands which touched your risen body. Fill us, with the incredible certainty their senses told them...you are real in our lives. Give us assurance not of our senses but of faith and imagination and send us into the world to speak new life to others. Because you have breathed peace into us...help us to know your presence among us and be at peace within ourselves and with one another.

Transform our conversations with those whom we love both inside this community here at Round Hill and those outside these walls...so that the power of your message of the miracle that life can be transformed can be communicated to all who long to hear. Help us not to let our doubts overwhelm us, rather let them help us to grow. Help us not to dwell on our problems, but on the needs of those who are hurting, knowing if we trust in you...new life will come to us as well.

And we pray all of these things in the name of the one who taught us to pray together, saying...