

Second Reformed Church, Pella
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John 20:19-30
Believing with All Your Senses

Sun. March 30, 2008

In our reading from John's gospel today, Jesus comes and stands among his disciples, even though the doors are locked. And the surprised disciples *see* Jesus. There he is, in their midst. Then Jesus speaks to them. "Peace be with you," he says to the frightened and confused followers. Gentle words of comfort. The disciples *hear* Jesus.

Finally, Jesus breathes upon them and they receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus' breath carries all sorts of clues and suggestions. At the very least, it is one more indication that he is alive. He breathes. Breath in the Hebrew world meant life. Just as God breathed life into the nostrils of the mud creature in Eden, so here Jesus breathes power and authority into his followers. He sends them out to carry the gospel.

More simply and literally however, in order to feel the breath of Jesus upon them the disciples had to be gathered close, very close. It is a picture of intimacy and familiarity. Very rarely are we modern people close enough to others to feel their breath upon us. How did the disciples know Jesus was risen? They *felt* him; they felt his warm breath upon them. And Thomas touched his hands and side.

If we read on in the next chapter of John's gospel, Jesus is making breakfast for the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. After a night of fishing, the disciples pull their boat in and find Jesus on the beach. He has made a fire and is roasting fish and bread for the hungry fishermen. Smoky wood on a wet beach, roasting fish and bread. What an aroma! The disciples *smell* that Jesus is alive. And finally, Jesus gives them some of this fish and bread. They eat the freshly prepared food. The disciples *taste* that Christ is risen.

Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. The five senses. Was this intentional or a coincidence? It is hard to know. What is not hard to know is that John very clearly wants to indicate *how* the disciples encountered and met the risen Christ. How did Jesus share himself with his followers? In very tangible, up-close, in-the-flesh encounters. It wasn't as old gospel hymns says "in my heart." No, John wants to leave no doubt that the risen Jesus was seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted. Not a ghost, not a fantasy, not a memory, not a flashback, but experienced and known through all five senses.

But including all five senses was more than about trying to make a convincing case that Jesus was truly raised from the dead. I think it is also about helping us see *what it means to continue Jesus' ministry*. As Jesus breathed on the disciples with the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to serve, he said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." How are we sent? What are we sent to share? What are we called to do? To *embody* the love of God through sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. The disciples came to experience the risen Jesus in very tangible, sensory up-close encounters. This is how the world needs to experience Jesus too, incarnated, through all five senses.

I want you to play a little game with me this morning. If you have a pen or pencil to write with, you might even want to write down your entries or answers. I want us together to think about and recall how we have experienced Jesus through each one of our senses. Then I want us to think about how the wider world might experience Jesus through the five senses. So make two entries under each of the five senses—one for you personally, and one for your conjecture about the world. One rule: when I ask you to think about how you see Jesus, for example, many of you might want to answer things like, “in a sunset” or “in a rose.” For this game, at least, such non-human answers are not allowed. In Jesus Christ, God came among us as a human being. God became incarnate. And so your answers also will have to be human, personal, embodied—not from the wonders of creation.

The disciples saw Jesus standing among them in the locked room. The first category is *sight*. Where have you seen Jesus? Remember, rainbows or mountain peaks are not allowed.

- Our Wednesday evening SALT dinners sometimes cause me to pull my hair out. So many details to coordinate, so much work, so many people involved. Yet despite all the frustration, sometimes when I look around at Fellowship Hall and see 150 of you eating and talking and enjoying one another, I think to myself, “Maybe this is where I see Jesus.”

Where do you *see* Jesus, in a person or a group of people? I’m sure that those who have just returned from Haiti are full of stories of seeing Jesus. Where and how does the world *see* Jesus?

Jesus spoke and said, “Peace be with you.” Where do you hear Jesus?

- Is there a particular song, some words of scripture, poetry that helps you encounter the risen Christ? The cry of a tiny babe, perhaps?
- This one is difficult for me. In a world where so many shout loudly claiming to be the voice of Jesus, I wonder if perhaps silence is not where I hear Jesus best. Maybe that is bending my own rules. But as Mother Teresa said, “God is the friend of silence.”

Where does the risen Christ say “peace” to you in a way that you can *hear* it? Where does the world *hear* Jesus most clearly?

The disciples felt the warm breath of Jesus. What does Jesus feel like? How does the risen Christ touch you?

- I have a friend who describes very powerful moments with God as “like having a third lung.” There is sense of fullness, of being stretched, bursting, filled. Or does Jesus feel like a long, tender embrace from a dear friend?
- I know some of you don’t care for it when Steve occasionally has you mark your neighbor with the sign of the cross as a gesture of forgiveness. It may stretch our comfort zones (like the disciples being close enough to feel the breath of Jesus, we have to be in close proximity) but might that be what the touch of Jesus feels like?
- Right before Steve and I arrived at our first congregation, Doug and Nancy, members of that church, lost their oldest son in a car accident. A few months later when Emma was born, Nancy asked if she could take care of Emma and later Chloe every Sunday mornings while Steve and I were leading worship. The girls would sit with them in the front pew each week. To this day, my daughters can tell you in which pocket Doug kept

his mints, or give you almost a complete inventory of Nancy's purse. Emma and Chloe remember Nancy's fingernails and the beauty marks on her hands, the scars and moles on Doug's hands, as they held them and amused them during worship. If you asked them what Jesus felt like, they might answer, "Doug and Nancy's hands."

Where do you *feel* the breath or touch of Jesus? And where does the world *feel* Jesus? Somewhere in Omaha there are 250 people wearing coats that you donated and our youth distributed last December. I like to hope that on a cold and wet day, when one of those people puts on their coat, they say, "Ah, that feels like Jesus."

Smell. The disciples smelled a fire and roasting fish. It is said that the sense of smell is most associated with our memory. Smells evoke our most powerful memories. Where do you smell the risen Jesus?

- Our Orthodox and Catholic friends often use incense in worship to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit—the smell of incense reminds them that they are in a holy place.
- Our prayers and praise are described in scripture as rising before God as a pleasing aroma.

Maybe we have to bend our rules about only allowing for embodied, human answers, but what is the *smell* of Jesus for you? What is the *smell* of Jesus in the wider world?

Finally, taste. Jesus and his disciples ate fish together. What is the taste of Jesus?

- For me, I would say "sweetness." Not candy sweet, but joy. The satisfaction of following Jesus, at its best is sweet—perhaps sweet like the taste of the grape juice we share at his table.
- Recently, I read a "lament" from a young 20 something Christian. He was lamenting the church that had raised and shaped him. Interestingly, many of the laments had to do with taste! Here are some of his lines...

I needed to see the bread, feel it, smell it, taste it, chew it and swallow it...
You gave me a thin, dry wafer.
I needed to drink deeply the cup—to smell the aroma and taste the red wine...
You gave me a thimble of grape juice.
I needed dark, robust coffee in a ceramic mug after church...
You gave me watered down decaf coffee in a styrofoam cup.
I needed to feast at church...
You gave me a windmill cookie.

What is the *taste* of the risen Lord, for you? For the world? The rice that you purchased for the families of Pignon, Haiti, that rice may very well be the *taste* of Jesus.

Incarnate. Embodied. Jesus wants to meet us fully. He wants us to encounter him with all of our senses. And as Jesus sends us into the world, the world needs to experience Jesus with all of its senses too. Our lives should carry Jesus in a very full-bodied, robust, up-close way.