



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Easter Love Made Real

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012

On Christmas Eve, we always read from The Velveteen Rabbit for our children's service, the part where the Skin Horse explains to the little toy rabbit about love and how it makes you real. Throughout the year, we hear in the Gospel stories and in the readings how Jesus makes God real to us. He does that well. We, however, don't always do a good job of making Jesus real. I remember taking my daughter, Melanie, to a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* when she was in Middle School. It was a particularly fine presentation of Andrew Lloyd Weber's rock opera. When it was over, Melanie sat very still for a bit and then she said, "You know, Mom, I've gone to Sunday School all my life and I don't think I ever thought of him as a real person until now." I remember thinking, "Wow, we need to do a better job in Sunday School!" But, you know, it's not all that easy to make this larger than life, miracle producing, divine human seem like one of us. Especially on a day like today.

I had my own experience of Jesus becoming real. I had transferred to the Episcopal Seminary in Chicago for my senior year of theological education. As the Fall term began, I did what I always do, join the choir. What I didn't know was that there was a faculty member just waiting for a soprano to show up so he could stage a production of something called *Visitatio Sepulchri*, a 12th century sung drama of John's Gospel story of the three Mary's visit to the tomb on Easter morning. His vision was for it to be performed in place of the Gospel reading for our Easter service. He casually suggested to me that I should audition for it. When the auditions were announced I assumed that my friend Cynthia, a professional mezzo-soprano would be auditioning for the lead role of Mary Magdalene. She said succinctly, "Not on your life!" I was beginning to get the picture. Actually, the only other person to audition for the role was my history professor – that was awkward. She was cast as the Angel and I was handed the score of Mary Magdalene's part which was the hardest, highest thing I'd ever tried to sing in my life. And it was in Latin, mostly a capella -- no accompaniment to help me out. I spent hours every week of the Winter term with the music director learning and rehearsing the part. The most problematic line came right after Mary's scene in the Garden with Jesus. The one thought to be the gardener is indeed the Risen Lord, and he says her name and sends her to tell the others. The two other Mary's arrive and she turns to them and sings excitedly "I have seen the Lord!" The part was written in a range that only dogs can hear. I was very worried about that part. I'd become focused, to the point of obsession on getting it all right, on doing a good job.



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The day came and everything we had rehearsed was unfolding beautifully. The role that I was playing was somehow taking over and I was less myself and a little bit more Mary Magdalene, than I had anticipated. Suddenly, there was David, the gifted baritone who was singing the role of Jesus, and I'm begging him to tell me where they have taken the body of the one that I love. He turns to me and said "Maria." In that moment, I was not in Evanston, Illinois; I was outside of the tomb, face to face with the resurrected Jesus. I saw tears literally shoot out of my eyes into the space between us. I didn't know tear ducts could do that. He sang his lines and turned and left. I was later told that I sang that dreaded line just fine, but I have no memory of it. I made it through the last bits and then as the entire congregation sang together, I just sobbed.

In that moment, Jesus had become real. Intellectually, I had known that he was a real person who had lived in Palestine during the time of Caesar. After all, I'd studied the "historical Jesus." But I'm not sure that I had truly loved him until in that moment when I was a little bit Mary Magdalene, and he called me by name so gently. In that moment, I was drawn into a greater drama than the one I thought I had signed on to. Until that moment I had not known how impoverished my experience of Jesus had been. It certainly hadn't been real. It hadn't been love.

The Velveteen Rabbit asked the Skin Horse, "Does it hurt when you become real?" On Friday night here in the dimly lit church, Jesus' pain, humiliation and grace became real to us. Many of us felt, as we had never felt before, the pain of the one who died so that God's love might become real to us. And now this morning the joy spills out over the whole earth. He is risen. Death is an illusion. Only love is real.

So the question for this Easter morning is, what does this Jesus' brand of real love look like when it happens through our lives? How can we also be examples of God's love made real in the world? Well, I can tell you that it always means going further than you ever intended. We already love the people sitting around us, so this "going further" Easter love probably looks like seeking out those we don't normally see, the poor in our midst, the ones we avoid, the ones of whom we are afraid or of whom we disapprove. That shouldn't hurt, although it might be a bit uncomfortable. Discovering your ability to love them can add new depth to Easter joy.

Real, Jesus style love, looks at who you are and what you have and sees it all as something to be shared with the world. Now, that could hurt, if you have never found joy in sacrificial giving before. But when we hold up a sacrifice of our treasure next to the sacrifice on the cross, it seems like so little. And oddly enough, it can be a source of freedom and new life like you never expected. When God's love has become real for you, all insecurity is overcome by the knowledge of abundance. That's what Easter shows us, God's abundant generosity and forgiveness. Let that message invade you and you will find that giving and receiving become an everflowing stream.



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Real Easter love as understood in the resurrection is not just a story about something that happened to Jesus. It is a defining statement about who we are, the part of creation made in God's image. We learn through Jesus' resurrection that we are also eternal beings. Our human experience may end, but as a part of Christ, who was and is and is to come, we are partakers in eternal life.

Easter love looks like accepting the knowledge of glory within you. Jesus died and rose so that we might no longer be blind. His resurrection frees us to be courageous, joyous examples of real love turned loose on the world. His resurrection taught us that we can learn to love just as he did. Imagine what that will be like! I know what it sounds like. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!