

**Reflection: Are You for Real?
Second Sunday of Easter 2010
John 20: 1-19, Acts 5:27-32**

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I don't know how many of you, if any, watch the television reality series, *American Idol* where individuals compete, musically, to become number one new music idol in America. I don't watch this regularly but have seen it and might find myself tuning in near the end of the season when it really gets good.

I was shown a clip from a previous year's final idol show which I am going to share with you. The clip was shown to me during a lecture by Leonard Sweet who is known as a Christian historian and futurist. He showed us the clip as we were talking about how to tell the story of our faith in our current context in a way that is relevant and understandable. There was a lot of talk about the realities of our time which is that we are entrenched in virtual reality. Although rare, there are already virtual churches, people who go to church online or who don't attend church but who are part of a virtual church community or who simply get their weekly theological food by downloading podcasts of sermons and blogs. We know this. But Leonard showed us this clip from *American Idol* to get us thinking even further, virtually, 20 or so years down the road. The clip is one whereby Celine Dion is singing a duet with Elvis Presley. It is not an Elvis impersonator but a hologrammed Elvis so that it appears as a live show with both on stage. (Show clip; see the link at the end of this sermon)

This is the kind of medium that we are looking at in the not too distant world—what will we do as a church—are we up for telling our story in new form? What intrigued me about this use of the clip, regardless of what you think about Elvis or Celine, was the response from the church folk gathered at the lecture. Many were intrigued. But one response was cynicism—“Why did they want to do that—he is dead?” And the second response was “but it doesn't matter because it is not real.” The comment about what any of us would want with a dead man seemed rather audacious coming from Christians who spend quite a bit of time talking about an apparent dead man! The second comment, Leonard picked up on. Why wasn't it real? What was missing, he questioned. It was determined that touch was missing. Although the appearance was real, and the technology convincing enough to bring tears to the eyes of many who looked on and pure delight at the experience—what seemed to be missing was that Elvis as hologram meant that he didn't physically touch or be touched. He wasn't real. Is that what we need to make things real?

What if our need for empirical, sensory, concrete data is keeping us from an experience? In some ways the hologrammed Elvis accomplished what it was hoping to: in a context whereby human potential and pop icons are celebrated

and sought after, entertainers of then and now were real and their craft shared and engagement happened to shape the hearts and minds and potential of those who came to listen.

In the first stories of Easter—in that first Easter week of our tradition—we are told the disciples were behind locked doors and Jesus appeared and stood among them and said: “Peace be with you.” But Thomas was not with them and when he returned the other disciples told him about the appearance of Jesus. But he said: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” In other words...unless I touch him—unless I can reach out and physically engage him he is not real—it is not real.

We still live in a very empirical world. We (as Sweet says) live in a world still very much measured by our ability to scientifically prove things even though we are told that as we inch further and further into the post modern and the virtual world, that will shift. And that makes Easter, perhaps the hardest part of our story. In an attempt to reinvent itself over the years and in an attempt at relevancy, the church has had the debates of science and proof. Did the resurrection happen, is it myth, is it metaphor, is there evidence of an empty tomb, a stone moved, when did the witnesses write things down? How do the stories compare, how plausible are they?

And the story of Thomas was written for these reasons. Told and written for those who need, rely upon, some empirical data—unless you can prove it—I’m not sure I can believe. For those who can’t quite just sing the hymns blindly with theology that doesn’t quite make sense. The gospel writer of John wrote this down for those who weren’t there (because we didn’t live then) and who said—but its not real if it doesn’t involve touch. To which the story and mystery of the risen Christ appears and challenges: What if our need for empirical, sensory, concrete data is keeping us from an experience?

The first disciples had lots of signs...empty tombs, grave clothes, stones moved, meals, angels and more. What about the signs for those without the empirical data? What part of the Easter story do you feel here (pointing at heart)...resonating...making sense, releasing an energy? When does that template of new life take shape in the here and now? Was it like the first disciples when a moment of forgiveness unlocked you from darkness to find peace? When understanding meant new freedom and joy and hope? When finally, finally darkness turned toward dawn?

Every year during lent, holy week, I try to dust off some of the movies that have been made about the Jesus story and watch the screen version of our faith for the good and the bad: *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Jesus of Nazareth*, *Jesus of Montreal* and I always give Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of Christ* a pass. But my all time favourite is *Jesus of Montreal*. In it, a contemporary actor’s life story

parallels that of Christ's. In the end, as the contemporary actor comes to his death it appears that is indeed the end of the movie. And forgetting that he is acting out the actual story of Jesus one gets lost in his story rather than the one he is telling. So when he dies there is a sense of deep sadness and sympathy for his friends. Until the final scene is in a hospital operating room (OR) where a young man wakes up having just received a heart transplant. In a room beside that...a woman wakes up having just received new eyes—corneal transplant. Then audience is jolted back to the original story—an appearance of resurrection. And we are jolted back to wondering—how exactly is the risen Christ seen in our time? Maybe it is in the way that our heart beats differently because in the Christ story we see not the emblem of death and hatred as utmost powerful but the power of hope and potential and possibility.

Not so many weeks ago a number of United Church clergy were gathered, as is so often the case, to discuss the changing church. What next, how do we make change so that the church survives, stays relevant, reads the culture of our time and tells our story? This seems to be the leadership mandate of our time. One of the questions that someone bravely asked was how do we keep, keeping on? One person in the circle responded and said that the thing that keeps him going amidst it all is that God keeps showing up.

Thank God the writer of John gave us Thomas. How can we possibly believe without some raw empirical data? And God shows up and breathes the holy spirit into us.

Is it not our job as those who proclaim the Easter story to have Easter glasses on—to be a community of watchers, seekers, hearers, tenders to God showing up in the risen Christ in whatever form it comes? We've seen it, haven't we?...An appearance...?

How about that moment when feeling alone in a hospital bed, bent over in pain and wondering if life will ever return to normal someone gets a visit from that familiar face from their community who walks through the door of isolation to say you are not alone—did you notice it—living, breathing Christ.

Or how about the moment when finally, finally someone overcome by addiction and poverty gets just enough strength to cross the threshold to recovery when someone takes the time to learn his name, his first and last name and with just that shred of dignity begins to look others in the eye and see he belongs, and has a place and that life is more than what he can see facing down—an appearance of the risen one.

Or how about when the cloud of deep depression begins to lift and you can begin to notice life flourishing again and get through a day without pain—new life, new breath, darkness lifted.

Or how about simply standing in a garden beside a young one filled with innocent wonder at flourishing perennials who says: “Look, everything is getting alive again.”

The echoes of the first disciples are heard—“we have seen the Lord.”

After seeing that Elvis clip for the first time and wondering about people’s responses—I joked with Linnea Good....one of our United Church musicians...so when do we get to hologram Jesus for you to do a duet with? As I walked away I wondered if in our virtual reality that has already been done.

In our seeking after only empirical evidence let’s not miss the experience of the risen one in our midst. God shows up.

May be it so!

Here’s the link to the Celine Dion & Elvis video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtMnwZK0twA>