

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 26, 2009
Mr. Robert Haberman
“REAL Clues”

Scriptures:
Psalm 4
Luke 24:36b-48



Several weeks ago while on a business trip, I was stopped by a stranger who knew my name. He said, “Are you Bob Haberman”. I said, “Yes,” and he said, “You probably don’t recognize me. It’s been a couple of years, but I know you from high school. I’m John Smith.” My high school graduation class had over 300 students and I didn’t know everybody so it was not too surprising I didn’t recall his name, but he knew mine.

Usually at my age you remember things from the past but what happened yesterday is sometimes difficult to recall. In any case he asked how I’ve been and we started to talk about the good old days. This was fun and I didn’t want to end the conversation short so I suggested we go have a cup of coffee or a drink. Since it was late in the day, we went to a nearby restaurant, ordered a drink and reminisced. We spoke about our teachers, the friends we had in common, and some of the crazy things we did as kids—the rock and roll songs, cars and, of course, girls. As he spoke, I started to wonder how he knew all this stuff and, in particular, some of the details of my life that were special to me. The topic of conversation then moved to the time beyond high school and I started to become a little apprehensive since he knew things about my life that only my family knows. He spoke about my time at college, the career choices I made and my family. I was starting to wonder if he worked for the government and was the person who checked my background for a security clearance. Since 9/11, big brother is indeed watching so maybe there is a very reasonable explanation for all of this. But then he spoke about my joys and sorrows. It brought laughs and tears. There was nothing judgmental in his words, only love.

As you have probably guessed, this is a fictional story. But, wouldn’t it be wonderful to meet someone like this? Regardless of your religious or non-religious beliefs you would be changed by this encounter for the rest of your life. In our reading from the Gospel of Luke, the disciples were changed and nearly everybody who met Jesus after his resurrection was changed. But I wish to draw your attention to the beginning of the disciples’ encounter with Jesus. “And he said to them, ‘Why are you troubled and why do questions rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that is I myself; handle me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see I have.’” And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.

Jesus was providing clear proof of his material existence. He is not a ghost or spirit, but consists of flesh and blood. He is Real. Similar proof is offered to doubting Thomas in the Gospel of John: “Put your finger here and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless but believing”. And finally Paul on the road to Damascus is transformed by an encounter with Jesus.

2000 years ago, God dramatically entered the lives of the disciples. God was hard to ignore, but what about today? We do not encounter Jesus as described in my fictional story, nor do we sit across the table from Jesus and discuss his message of love, nor do we see the wounds in his hands and side, nor are we blinded by the light of his presence as Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. Time has removed us from a one-on-one sit-down with Jesus. One answer of course was given by Jesus: “The Holy Spirit will take my place” and indeed that occurred during Pentecost. But again that was 2000 years ago. So what do we do today to reinforce our faith? What are the proofs?

As it turns out, theologians and philosophers have wrestled with proofs of the existence of God for centuries and have concluded from mind-bending arguments that God’s existence cannot be proved or disproved. However, I recently came across a book that puts the various attempts at proof in the context of clues to Gods’ existence. The book is written by Rev. Timothy Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC and the title of the book is “The Reason for God, Belief in the Age of Skepticism”. I will just summarize some of the “clues”.

Clue No. 1: First Cause, Prime Mover, or more recently called the Cosmological Argument. Scientists agree that the universe was created about 15 billion years ago. It began with an incredible concentration of energy occupying the size of a basketball. In a fraction of a second, space, time and matter was created. It is argued that God is the cause. But what existed before this and is God exempt from causality? Perhaps, according to Rev. Keller we should view the Cosmological argument as a clue, a clue that there may be something besides the natural world.

Clue No. 2: Argument from Design also called the Anthropic Principle. There is a delicate balance in nature for human life to exist. The balance is quantified by very specific values of many constants. One example is the cosmological constant used in Einstein’s general theory of relativity. If the value is changed by just one part in over a billion, according to his theory, the universe would not have been formed. Other constants such as the forces that bind atoms need very precise values otherwise elements could not have been created. From this precise design of the universe it is argued that the universe needed a designer, God. However, one counter argument is the multi-universe theory. This theory states that over time many universes were created and ours is simply the one that worked. Although modern mathematical theories posit this, the theories are impossible to prove. So, according to Rev. Keller we are again left with a clue.

Clue No. 3: Moral Argument. This argument is eloquently presented by C. S. Lewis in his book, “Mere Christianity”. According to Lewis, “The moral law is not any one instinct, it is something which makes a kind of tune (the tune we call goodness or right conduct) by di-

recting our instincts”. The moral law tells us how we *ought* to behave and the source of this law is God. For example, if we saw someone in peril, we know what we ought to do. The counter argument put forward by evolutionary psychologists is that evolution produced an “altruistic gene”. As it turns out, this counter-argument is currently in much debate. So we are again left with a clue.

Clue No. 4: Religious Experience Argument. This is an argument we might be able to relate to. For example, one could argue that in the fall of 2004 God intervened and the Boston Red Sox, against overwhelming odds and an 86-year curse won 8 straight games to win the World Series after losing to the Yankees 19 to 8 in the 3rd game of the playoff series. More than likely, however, God deals in more serious matters.

Religious experiences are very personal, and are of significance only to the individual. Quite often they come in the form of coincidences that are statistically probable or very improbable. You cannot, however, conclude that improbable coincidences are caused by God, but you can certainly conclude that they provide a clue to God’s existence.

Let me give you an example. On Palm Sunday, Ann gave a sermon titled, “Follow the Leader”, the leader of course being Jesus. That evening while having dinner with my son and my 7-year old grandson David Jr., I asked David what he’s been doing in school. He answered, “We learned a new game this week. It’s called ‘Follow the Leader’”. I then asked, “What makes a leader”? He answered, “A leader sets a good example”. This was an interesting coincidence. The next day, my wife Connie and I drove down to visit our son Charles and his family in Atlanta. It’s a 2-day trip and, on the evening of the first day, I started to think about this coincidence and wondered about God producing a really improbable event. The next day we stopped for lunch about 100 miles outside of Atlanta. It was a random stop and, rather than eat at Cracker Barrel where we usually eat, decided on a whim to eat at a Waffle House. After the waitress took our order I commented how much colder it was than Connecticut. The waitress then asked where in Connecticut we come from. After telling her Old Mystic, she said she has family in Mystic and it turned out we knew people in common. Before leaving the restaurant I asked her, “Are we the first people she has meet from Mystic in all her 40+ years of waitressing”. She answered, “Yes”. Coincidence, divine intervention or clue?

Clue No. 5. This is my favorite clue. It has its origin in a children’s story. We pick up the story with a conversation between two toy animals.

“‘What is REAL ?’ asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. ‘Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and have a stick-out handle?’

‘Real isn’t how you are made, said the Skin Horse. ‘It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL’.

‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit.

‘Sometimes’, said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘When you are Real, you don’t mind being hurt’.

‘Does it happen all at once, like being wound up’, he asked, ‘or bit by bit?’.

‘It doesn’t happen all at once’, said the Skin Horse. ‘YOU BECOME’. It

takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand'.

'I suppose YOU are REAL?', said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

'The Boy's uncle made me REAL', he said. 'That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real, you can't become unreal again. IT LASTS FOR ALWAYS.'"

This of course is a reading from *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. This wonderful children's story describes a transformation that takes place when we are loved. We become REAL. Although it is argued by some that evolution is responsible for love, I personally feel this is the second most convincing clue to the existence of God.

Last Clue: Toward the end of the story the little boy has recovered from a very serious illness, and fearing that his toys may still contain a virus, the Velveteen Rabbit is thrown into the garden to be burned. "'Of what use was it to be loved and become Real if it all ended like this?' said the rabbit. And a tear, a real tear trickled down his shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground. And then a strange thing happened. For where the tear had fallen, a mysterious flower grew out of the ground. It was so beautiful that the little rabbit forgot to cry. And presently, a blossom opened and out of it stepped a Fairy. And she gathered up the little rabbit in her arms and kissed him on his velveteen nose that was all damp from crying. And she said to him, 'I take care of all the playthings the children have loved and I turn them into REAL'. 'Wasn't I Real before?' asked the little rabbit. You were REAL to the boy,' the Fairy said, because he loved you. Now you shall be REAL to EVERYONE.'"

I can't help but feel that when Jesus died, God shed a tear. And he returned Jesus to us, REAL. And the ultimate clue is that for 2000 years he has been REAL to millions and millions and millions of people.

Amen.