

Transforming Skank

B Ascension Sunday--Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

There's this room in the basement of our house that I have always secretly thought of as The Skanky Room. The Skanky Room is on the uphill side and has tended to leak when it rains hard. Water seeps through the cement walls, causing the paint to peel and bloom with mold. Until fairly recently, The Skanky Room was crammed with unwanted stuff: board games no one played, cans of paint, a rusty bike, soggy cardboard boxes of Styrofoam peanuts, broken lamps that someday we might get around to fixing. Cobwebs draped the exposed beams and pipes overhead. The air smelled like a mildewed sponge. Five seconds in The Skanky Room would lead any sane individual to the conclusion I had long ago reached: it was a breeding ground for lung disease and good only as the kind of materialist compost heap for which it was being used.

You might imagine, then, my surprise to learn that my wife, Nan, was thinking of making The Skanky Room into a kids' playroom with tumbling mats, swings, and a trapeze. The conversation went something like this: "A kid's play room, you've got to be kidding! I wouldn't use that place as a prison cell for my worst enemy."

"Well, we did promise to give them one, and it's the only room in the house with exposed beams to hang the swings from."

"No, honey. Have you been in there? It's disgusting. Trust me, no amount of cleaning will ever make that room habitable, let alone appealing. No one's going to want to go down there."

So, naturally, it was Christmas day two months later that Nan led the family down the basement stairs into a Skanky Room that had been utterly and unbelievably transformed. Rubber mats padded the cement floor and walls. A swing and a trapeze hung from the beams (which, along with the exposed pipes, had disappeared into a camouflaging coat of black paint). New lighting fixtures had been installed. The room was clean, freshly painted, mold-free, and unrecognizable. It was a Christmas gift our children will not soon forget. Squealing, they charged into the room while I got out my knife and fork to start in on my heaping plate of crow.

Well, of course, there was a lesson for me in that whole interaction--in addition to never underestimating my wife's determination, I mean. The lesson I'm talking about had to do with vision and promise. I saw the Skanky Room as just that—skanky! hopelessly skanky!—and decided that it was not worth trying to change. Nan saw the Skanky Room for its potential to become a playroom, and her imagination and immense energy brought that vision into being. I envisioned only the perpetuation of what was. She believed in the promise of what could be.

Well, it must be that same sense of vision, that same trust in the promise of an unrealized future, that brings the disciples back from Jesus' leave-taking in our gospel reading today "with great joy" and "continually...blessing God." When you think about it, they've really been through an emotional roller coaster, from the hope of Jesus' ministry, to the despair and grief of his death, to the wonder of his resurrected presence with them, to this last, stunning turn of events in which, after forty days of appearances among them, Jesus leads them out to Bethany, blesses them, and "is carried up into heaven." And what do they have upon his departure? Nothing tangible. Only the

daunting instruction to spread his message of hope "to the ends of the earth" and the promise that if they wait in Jerusalem they will be "clothed with [the] power [of the Holy Spirit] from on high" and that, at some point, who knows when, Jesus will return "in the same way as you saw him go." In other words, all they have is a vision and a promise for the future. *Christ will return to usher in his kingdom of peace and justice, and you will be clothed with power to prepare the world!* And for once in their bumbling, backward lives, the disciples believe in this vision. For once, they trust in this promise. They don't sink into mourning or fear or pessimism but return to Jerusalem to wait in the temple, blessing God with great joy.

Now, let's be clear about something. It's not that the world has been magically transformed into a kind and painless place. In short order, the disciples will spread out into that world and be beaten, jailed, and murdered for proclaiming a kingdom of justice and love that the world's powers do not want to make way for. But the disciples have witnessed the transformation that God can work within that world. They have glimpsed a reality that transcends the mere appearance of things and will ultimately outlast pain and ugliness and death. And because they have glimpsed this reality, they themselves become instrumental in planting it around them. Because the disciples believe in the kingdom of God, they become conduits through which God brings that kingdom into being.

So the world is a skanky place, there's no doubt about it. The world is full of pain and injustice and loss. But it is also, and always, in the process of becoming a playroom for the children of God, where the air is clean and the toys are shared and no one is excluded. And the question is, do we just want to sit around and be overwhelmed by the

current evidence, or do we want to be part of birthing that new order that has been promised? Will we limit our vision only to the perpetuation of what is, or will we believe and participate in God's vision of what will be? Think about it. Get back to me. Because depending on how you answer, I may have a heaping plate of crow to share with you!