

“Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” (Mark 8:31) This was not what the disciples wanted to hear. They focused on the suffering and rejection and didn’t pay attention to or wonder about the miracle of what Jesus meant to “rise again.” It’s hard for us too as we struggle with the challenges of daily life. Intellectually we may know that our lives are being transformed as we conform to Christ but sometimes we can lose sight of the glorious mystery of what Christ has promised.

Perhaps this children’s story can help.

Some of you may know the “Velveteen Rabbit” by Margery Williams. In it a toy rabbit is given to a boy but the boy is not particularly interested in the toy rabbit until his Nana slips it into his bed for comfort. Thereafter the two are inseparable. One day while outside with the boy the toy rabbit comes face to face with real rabbits and to his dismay, he discovers that he is not “Real”. He asks a wise old toy about what it means to be “Real.”

*“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 happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who 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.”*

Being “Real” sounds amazing but it seems that there is a lot to go through before you get there. The toy rabbit

*“longed to become Real, to know what it felt like; and yet the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad. He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him.”*

But the boy’s love made all the difference.

*"Weeks passed, and the velveteen rabbit grew very old and shabby, but the Boy loved him just as much. He loved him so hard that he loved all his whiskers off, and the pink lining to his ears turned grey, and his brown spots faded. He even began to lose his shape, and he scarcely looked like a rabbit any more, except to the Boy. To him he was always beautiful, and that was all that the little Rabbit cared about. He didn't mind how he looked to other people, because the nursery magic had made him Real, and when you are Real shabbiness doesn't matter."*

Next the boy falls ill with scarlet fever and the toy rabbit keeps him company throughout his illness. The toy rabbit longs for the adventures that they had had before and looks forward to the day when they will do so again. Unfortunately, the boy's doctor declares that all the boy's belonging must be burnt to avoid further infection. The toy rabbit is scooped up with some other toys into a bag and taken to be burned. The gardener leaves the bag outside overnight and in waiting for what was to come the toy rabbit wonders whether becoming "Real" was worthwhile.

*"Of what use was it to be loved and lose one's beauty and become Real if it all ended like this? And a tear, a real tear, trickled down his little shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground."*

*In its place flower springs up and the nursery magic fairy emerges and tells him:*

*"I take care of all the playthings that the children have loved. When they are old and worn out and the children don't need them any more, then I come and take them away with me and 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 every one."*

One of the suggested readings for our service of Christian burial is from 1 John 3:1-2

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. ... Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*

With that the toy rabbit discovers that he has legs that work and he hops off into the bushes.

Time passes and one day the boy is back in the woods and he sees a little rabbit looking out at him. He is struck by the rabbit's resemblance to his beloved velveteen rabbit.

*"But he never knew that it really was his own Bunny, come back to look at the child who had first helped him to be Real."*

Amen.