

HOPE BACKWARDS, REMEMBER FORWARDS

Luke 24:1-12

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The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Easter Sunday April 21, 2019

It has been quite a month this week! As the flames began to rise over the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris Monday the online conspiracy theorists were already cranking up their bit of angst and hysteria, as usual. Back at home, the long-awaited release of the Mueller Report Thursday, if nothing else, revealed that we indeed live in two Americas, with very different perceptions of right and wrong. In Columbine, Colorado, as the 20th anniversary of that horrific school shooting approached, the travels of a young Florida woman with an infatuation with the shooting provoked a lock-out at Columbine High School, before the crisis ended with the young woman's apparent suicide. And this Easter morning, in Sri Lanka, the drumbeat of terror continued, this time striking Christian churches and tourist hotels, with hundreds of casualties. The end result of each incident was an all-too familiar grief, yet a grief strong enough to send seismic shudders around the world.

Unnecessary and untimely death, insidious disease, natural disasters, terrorist aggression, governmental tyranny – they always send shockwaves of grief, fear, and despair through those who hear the news. A certain disorientation sets in. And like the Psalmist, people cry out, “How long, O Lord?” Not unlike the world the Irish poet William Butler Yeats described in 1919, after World War One:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.¹

I find Yeats' words eerily descriptive of our own day. I wonder if they might not also give expression to the inner thoughts of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the others as they made their way to the tomb in the deep dawn of that Sunday morning to anoint the body of the One on whom they had pinned their hopes. The “ceremony of innocence” had been drowned. Their Lord had been crucified, dead, and buried.

Then, as if that weren't enough, now the body was missing, too. They couldn't even do the one final act they had to offer. The angel at the tomb spoke good news, but they were not able initially to hear it. In their despair, says Luke, they were thoroughly

¹ William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172062>, accessed March 23, 2019.

perplexed... unnerved... disoriented. The angels spoke, but the women weren't comforted; Luke says, "they were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground."

But then the angels offered them a gentle word of reminder: "Remember how he spoke to you while he was still in Galilee?" they asked. "He said, 'The Son of Man must be handed over into the hands of people who are sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise.'" And then, Luke says, "they *remembered* his words." So, they ran to tell the eleven disciples. And did the disciples jump up and down with enthusiasm at the news? Not exactly. They treated the reports as nonsense. They could hardly have been more condescending.²

Bill Muehl, who used to teach at Yale Divinity School, told the story of how, for a season, he took his children to a Unitarian Sunday School in New Haven. On Easter Sunday one year his son came home from his class, and in response to a query about what had happened, said, "Well, Martha Coolidge said Jesus rose from the dead, and Bobby Hooker slapped her in the face."³ The disciples didn't get violent at the women's report, so far as we know, but they did react with disbelief. They dismissed their story as "an idle tale." Why? Was it because the women were women, and the men considered their witness unreliable? Possibly. Some Biblical scholars read the text that way. But Fred Craddock may also be right when he suggests that *no* witness bringing such news back to this dejected group could have expected a much better reception than the women got.⁴

Now, clearly these women disciples in Luke play an absolutely pivotal role in conducting the electricity of Easter. So, why don't their male counterparts believe? Their news seems too good to be true? Maybe, or maybe it is because if it *is* true, all bets are off, and a whole new set of responsibilities confronts them. Death they knew how to handle... disappointment, too. But *this* was something none of them had ever encountered before. The news was just overwhelming. We could spend a lot of time trying to analyze the reticence of the disciples to believe, and in doing so would miss our own reluctance. It's hard for *us* to believe, not just for them.

Also, too much analysis of the disciples' reluctance might lead us to forget that eventually they *did* come to believe the good news, *did* become the apostles whose brave acts of faithfulness formed the church. How did that happen? Where did they find their burst of energy? Did it grow out of an accumulation of witnesses: first, the women, then Peter, then the two who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus? Did it happen only when Jesus himself stood among them late that evening? Likely some of both, but I also suspect that what happened first to the women happened to the men as well. I believe it only began to come together for them when they finally *remembered*.

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke: Sacra Pagina*, Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1991, 388.

³ I cannot find the specific reference, but Bill told the story; I did find a note about it in my notes from the January 1989 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Atlanta.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990, 283, as interpreted by Rick Spalding in a paper he presented to the January 1995 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Memphis.

“Remember,” said the angelic figures to the women at the empty tomb. “Remember what he told you.” And as they remembered – *only* as they remembered – did it begin to make sense to them. One biblical scholar notes that it often happens this way. “Faith does not usually move from promise to fulfillment,” he said, “but from fulfillment to promise. Remembering is often the activating of the power of recognition.”⁵ In remembering, the women began to make sense of the empty tomb. As they remembered Jesus talking to them about his suffering, death and resurrection, the fog around the events of that morning began to clear. And it would do the same for the eleven; and such remembrance would fuel the energies of Christ’s Church. And as it has done for the church for centuries, remembering the promises of Christ can do the same for us. Such remembering is an act that claims space and time in us, allows change to build and us to grow with it. As we look back on our own lives and remember Gospel teachings, we can begin to understand the power of Christ’s resurrection at work in our lives. As we look back on our lives, we also will remember times when God was obviously moving, stirring us, though we could not grasp it or see it clearly at the time.

The American ethicist Paul Lehmann used to say, “Christians are people who hope backwards and remember forwards.”⁶ Our hope for the future is based on promises and lessons from the past, not a blind optimism that ignores history. Hope backwards and remember forwards. It’s the reverse order of what we often think, but I believe Lehman was right. The hope by which *Christians* live has to do with a shared past. The empty tomb of Easter means that other promises Jesus made will also be kept – the meek *will* inherit the earth, those who weep now *will* laugh, those who hunger now *will* be satisfied, the way to be a neighbor is the way of the Good Samaritan, God’s grace is like that of a Father who runs to welcome a prodigal home. If the good news of Easter is true, then Jesus’ other promises are trustworthy and true as well. And if our hope is rooted in those past promises, then our remembering propels us forward to live as agents of grace and promise – not just to believe the promises, but to do our part to help *enact* them – to embrace the meek, to feed the hungry, to *be* the kinds of neighbors Jesus described, to strive for the confluence of mercy and justice in this world. In finding our memories, we also find our mission.

The exhortation of the Easter angels to “remember” is among Luke’s most distinctive contributions to our understanding of resurrection. In each of the Gospels Jesus predicts his own passion and ultimate vindication. But only Luke draws our attention to the precise fulfillment of these predictions in the very midst of the resurrection story. The messengers evoke in the women what is, for Luke, “one of the most redemptive of all activities: *remembrance*.” Rather than telling the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus has gone before them to Galilee, which looks forward, Luke turns the women backwards to their own memory. And they do remember, for they are

⁵ Craddock, 283.

⁶ As cited by Beverly Gaventa at the 1995 Moveable Feast, cf. note 4. Also, see Gaventa, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J095v11n01_01?journalCode=wrhd20, accessed March 16, 2016.

authentic witnesses, veterans of the ministry in Galilee. They do remember. And their remembering prompts them to go and share with the others their “awakened memories.”⁷

Luke teaches us that one of the most important responsibilities of any faith community is the faithful exercise of its memory. Says Rick Spalding, Luke all but insists that our redemption happens, at least in part, “as we recollect those particles of grace and truth that we have come upon, scattered around us in the ordinary tissue of our days.”⁸ If we fail to remember, then the darkness of these days *will be* unbearable. If we fail to remember, we will give in to our angers, our fears, and our despair. And there are plenty of politicians who will try to exploit them. But if, in remembering, we can recall all the ways God works for life and redemption, how God does so *in us and in others*, then we may find our hearts and wills strengthened once again to work for God’s purposes in the here and now. The novelist Frederick Buechner urges Christians to:

Remember what God has done in the lives of each of us, and beyond that remember what [God] has done in the life of the world; remember above all what God has done in Christ – remember those moments in our own lives when with only the dullest understanding but with the sharpest longing we have glimpsed that Christ’s kind of life is the only life that matters and that all other kinds of life are riddled with death; remember those moments in our lives when Christ came to us in countless disguises through people who one way or another strengthened us, comforted us, healed us, judged us, by the power of Christ alive within them.... [That’s] what there is to remember. And... *because* we remember, we have this high and holy hope: that what [God] has done, [God] will continue to do, that what [God] has begun in us and our world [God] will in unimaginable ways bring to fullness and fruition.⁹

Because we remember, we can have hope, even in this world of terror and darkness. We can be joyful, as the poet says, even though we have considered all the facts.¹⁰ Because we have sacred memory, we can have hope, which is so important in this land that operates all too often by fear. We *do* have hope, and we need to give strong voice to those hopes in our day. And our hope looks backwards, so that we may remember and live forwards. What is it that we remember? What is the memory that stirs us this Easter day? We remember that the tomb is empty, that Jesus is not confined by the grave, that we have reason to imagine finding life again, that life does not end in death, that sorrow and grief are never the last words, that we need not live fearfully, therefore, but boldly and faithfully, because what God has done, God will continue to do, and in the end God will still be God.

In the end, then, the news is good. It is good because it is God’s news. And it is good, because its end is life and wholeness and justice and peace... for *all* people – no limits. It is news we have heard many times before. It is news we have rehearsed in the

⁷ Spalding; cf. note 4.

⁸ Spalding.

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1984, 11-12.

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” 1991.

church Easter after Easter. But it bears rehearsing, for who knows when we will be called to remember. Do you remember the words? They begin as a murmur among women at the tomb. The words are shared at first timidly, then with increasing confidence, and finally with a shout. And even though they began at deep dawn on that first Easter, today they echo and reverberate wherever Christ's followers gather. They echo within us, they shatter us and shake us and send us to our knees even here, all these years later. Do you remember the words?

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

I tell you, friends, that is good news... very good news... and so important to remember... especially in these dark and demanding days.