

"Resurrecting Memories"

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But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Luke 24:1-12

True confession, as a child, I dreaded the time that led up to Easter. I absolutely loathed the weeks in February and March. And no, it wasn't because I knew that it was a time for penitence and introspection; it wasn't because I knew about the liturgical feelings and emotions associated with Lent. No, I dreaded the weeks leading up to Easter because it meant an excruciatingly extra amount time spent in Macy's Department Store with my mom, searching for Easter dresses. Even my top-notch whine couldn't get me out of wearing matching dresses with my sister, who I should add is four years older than I am, or I should add that I think we matched on Easter Sundays all the way up until she went away to college. And if we were really lucky, our mom even found a matching dress. Those were the years...

I can remember one year when we all made it to church, decked in our newest dresses, all put together in our Easter best, much to my mother's excitement. My dress was a beautiful robin's egg blue, with puffy sleeves, and the biggest, most pilgrim looking starched white lace collar you have ever seen! But what I remember most about this dress is look on my mama's face when I snuck into the sanctuary before the service started. Despite the triumphant brass, the lovely white lilies, and the joyful hymns, there was nothing that could be done to wipe the frown from my mom's face. Because my posse of friends had found the breakfast snack table, which had the most irresistible looking red strawberries, which I ate, and spilled all over that crisp white collar. Not even the resurrection could save me from the trouble that I was in. Of course, there were happy Easter memories collected along the way- there were the big family lunches that came after church, or the Easter egg hunts that led my cousins and I racing all over the yard, or dying Easter eggs around the kitchen table with my family. Or maybe my favorite is the one that came when I married into the Vogado family, which meant that every Easter morning would now include a 6 a.m. phone call of my mother-in-law singing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today!" Today was no exception.

Maybe you came this morning with some of your favorite Easter memories. Perhaps it is of worship services that end with a Hallelujah chorus in this sanctuary which has been



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your church home for a long time. Or maybe it is the memories of picking spring flowers in your yard that you or your children brought and lovingly put in the flower cross. Or waking up with the birds to give praise to God when the sun comes up for worship in Memorial Garden. Maybe you remember coming here years ago and now you find yourself back again, just wondering what you are searching for. It could be that you are here this morning ready to shake off some tough memories, and hopefully make some new ones.

Maybe you are here with great joy to hear the Easter story of resurrection told once again, to join in the proclamation that Christ is risen. For many, this story is one that instills deep gratitude and wonder. For some, this story is one that leaves one scratching their heads and troubled. For a few, it is hard to understand it as good news. For all, this story is the foundation of what we believe as followers of Jesus. However, the Easter story is not for those who are seeking easy answers. Even in the story we see a variety of responses- wonder, confusion, amazement, belief, and doubt. The message we hear today is one that is full of challenges, yet filled with hope.

The writer of Luke's gospel tells us that it was a group of women who first were witness to the resurrection. The passage before this story tells us that these women prepared the spices for Jesus' burial on Friday, but then being the good observant Jews that they were, they ceased their work on the Sabbath, tending to Jesus' body would just have to wait. Our story today picks up the day after the Sabbath, Sunday, the first day of the week. Coming to bring spices and attend to the work of burying of Jesus, these original "Spice Girls" are shocked to find an empty tomb. Expecting to find the body of Jesus, they instead find the stone rolled away and two men in dazzling clothes. Their confusion is evident as they look for Jesus, but then their confusion turns to terror when they see the two men. Like many in the Bible who find themselves troubled by the work of God in their midst, they are disoriented. But these men are there to help. They say to the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

For all the stories we have about the disciples messing up and misunderstanding the words, actions, intentions, and teachings of Jesus, these women have clearly been paying attention all along. Scripture says that they remembered Jesus' words, and turned from the tomb to go tell the eleven disciples and the rest of the followers of Jesus who were with them. The women, who had first been disoriented at the sight of the empty tomb, then have their bearings righted and gain orientation as they receive the message of Jesus' resurrection from the two messengers. They then reorient their action as they respond to the good news and rush to go and tell the message to others.

And in today's telling, the story does not end there. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women tell the story to the apostles, the hearers of the women's message thought they were telling an idle tale and they did not believe them. Translators of the original Greek have softened the word and protected us from its meaning. This word for idle tale, "*leros*" is only used this one time in all of the New Testament, and it is where we get our word "delirious." In its truest of meanings, it is a word that frankly I am not going to share from the pulpit on Easter Sunday, but the thesaurus would pull up malarkey, garbage, nonsense, balderdash. (Friends, insert epic Easter pun- boulder-dash-here). Culturally, malarkey is true for words shared by women in the first century. They were not reliable witnesses in such a patriarchal world, but there is something more going on here.

These women were taking this message to the community of believers, the people who have been the closest to Jesus. These are the disciples who have traveled with Jesus all along the way, they have seen all the miracles, they have pondered all the parables and teachings. Following the crucifixion of Jesus, they would have been praying that it all wasn't true, that Jesus wasn't dead; they were praying for their messiah. And yet, when they get the news that he has been raised from death to life, all they can do is proclaim it to be gibberish!

Perhaps it is their grief and weariness from the events of the last week, but they seem to have a memory block. They cannot remember that Jesus told them that this would happen. And maybe they don't want to remember. It's too painful. Why would you go looking for the living among the dead? We know the limits of the natural world, and to try to explain this is far too complicated. It is far too risky to remember that Jesus is about new life, especially in places that feel dead and broken, and to try to explain what that means makes us all sound like we are spitting gibberish. It is counter cultural, it even goes against the natural order of things, to say that there can be new life out of things that are dead. As Preacher Anna Carter Florence says so well, "If the dead won't even stay dead, what in the world can we count on? If the world is so upside down that dead stuff doesn't even stay dead anymore how are we going to live?"¹ The story of Easter is a charge to all of us that when we encounter God's resurrection, we are called to proclaim new life in places that feel dead and broken, and to take part in that redemptive work. And we are to proclaim and live that boldly, even when we feel that no one is going to believe what we have to say, even when we can barely believe it ourselves.

As an Easter people, what tales are we telling this morning? I wonder if we have somehow softened this Easter story along the way and reduced its message to the appropriate level of joy that fits with our Easter egg hunts, and happy candy filled baskets. Have we forgotten that to proclaim this new life means to say that the dead and sinful things that hold us captive have lost their sting? Have we forgotten that to proclaim this new life means that when we see places and people that are hurting and broken that we are the ones who are called to share the message of resurrection and actively work to heal those wounds? If we go home to a great Easter lunch and fail to remember all who are hungry, then we are spinning idle tales. If we have spent more time worrying about finding the best Easter clothes than we do worrying about those whose clothes fit into one backpack, then we are spinning idle tales. If we are more concerned with having everything look picture perfect and happy for this Easter Sunday, than reaching out to hold those who are in the grips of addiction, grief, or mental illness, then we are spinning idle tales. This is a good Sunday to check and see that the actions that accompany our proclaimed faith aren't just idle tales.

In the same way that this good news sent the women at the empty tomb running to tell others, so too are we called to run out into the world to share it and to live it, even when the very act of doing so might make people will think we are absolutely crazy. Theologian Walter Brueggemann understands the challenge and wonder of this call reminding us that, "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair."² Our

¹ Working Preacher. "Preaching Moment: Anna Carter Florence." June 2008.

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=2249>. Accessed 17 April 2019.

² Brueggemann, Walter; Reality, Grief, Hope, Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks. 2014. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

job then, this Easter morning is to help people remember resurrection and new life by how we live in this world. It's not just about what we say we believe, but how we live out what believe. Through the empty tomb, God calls on people to act. As one writer says, "Easter morning is God's clearest statement that the world is different and that those who follow in the pathway of the risen Lord are called to live differently."³ This good news is not just something we hear and observe, it is something that demands our response. We are called to remember Christ's words and encourage others to investigate, to come and see.

This is where those Easter memories are so important to our faith. The Christian faith is built upon remembering the promises of God and the countless ways in which those promises have been fulfilled. The women in this story remind us that remembering God's faithfulness in the past is the best way to build and reinforce our faith and make it stronger for the future. There is even a study in psychology that says that what we believe about the world comes from our memory. "Even your belief about who you are- your self-identity- is based on who you remember yourself to be. It is your memory that provides you with a sense of continuity in your life."⁴

But what happens when inevitably we, like the disciples, forget and our memory fails us? What happens when our belief falters? Well there is more good news today for us all. Before Jesus found himself at the cross, he shared with his believers a meal. A meal in which each time it is shared we would remember the greatest of gifts given for us. It is a meal that reminds us that there can be new life even when everything feels dead. It is a meal that reminds us that there is room for everyone at the table, and all are welcome, the doubters and believers, the sinners and deceivers. It is a meal that reminds us that what is broken is made whole. Easter might come once a year, but every Lord's Day, every Sunday, is an invitation to a "little Easter." When we gather around the table or when we come together to worship, it is an opportunity to claim the resurrection promise that God is making all things new. And then we carry that promise out into the world as agents of healing, where Christ is shaping, changing, renewing, and transforming. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed! Alleluia, amen!

³ Bartlett, David, L. *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2*. 2014; Louisville. Westminster John Knox Press. Pg. 346.

⁴ Alcock, James E. "Believing What We Remember." *Psychology Today*, 6 April 2018. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/belief/201804/believing-what-we-remember>. Accessed 16 April 2018.