

Muscle Memory

As my friend Jessica led the children's message for her congregation on Easter last year, she first asked the children, "When the women went into the tomb, what did they find?" A four-year-old named Teddy answered emphatically, "CHOCOLATE!!!" Jessica kept her composure and continued the story. When she got to the end and shared the amazing Good News, "Jesus isn't here. He's been raised from the dead," Jessica's son Huw who was 6 at the time replied, "By my calculations, that is impossible."

Huw is in good company—or at least not alone in his skepticism, according to Luke's telling of the story. The women have held onto the ointments and the spices since Friday evening when the sun set and the sabbath began. They likely longed for other tasks to pass the time, but sabbath is meant for rest, so there would not have been much to do other than sit and think and wait and pray and reflect, to re-live and re-see those awful final moments watching their friend being killed and his body being laid in a borrowed tomb. When the first rays of sunlight peek over the horizon, the sabbath is over and the women make their way to the tomb, finally be able to DO something. And when they arrive, something has changed. They find the stone rolled away, and they do NOT find Jesus. For an instant, they stand there stunned and confused. The terrifying, sparkling men break their astonished silence. They terrify the women by their presence and then they prod them—gently, I like to believe—"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" To their credit the women do not respond by saying they weren't looking for the living because they didn't have the foggiest idea that such a thing was even an option—by their calculations, a living Jesus was impossible. They had not been able to see or imagine anything beyond the cross.

Last year, Brian Blount, the former president of Union Presbyterian Seminary, addressed an online gathering of preachers. He said we need to build stronger muscle memory to teach and preach resurrection. "Resurrection is [a] concept that's hard to hold onto," he said. "Our [biblical] texts are focused on life; and too often we [preachers]...are focused on death." And then he talked about a friend learning how to ride a

motorcycle. The instructor said, “Where your eyes go, your bike will go.” And Blount’s friend rode straight into a light pole. “What she wanted to avoid, she headed straight into.” Blount went on to say, “We focus on the cross. We focus on all the struggle that goes with it...[and] we keep running into it.”¹

To be crystal clear, the cross is central to our story and essential to our faith, **AND** there is something beyond the cross that is worthy of our focus, too. Resurrection does not add up; resurrection does not fit into our calculations. So Dr. Blount calls on us to “develop the muscle memory of resurrection.” Muscle memory is what leads me to start rocking when I’m in line behind a parent with a fussy baby. Muscle memory is what enables me to bust out the arm motions for the one cheer I remember from high school cheerleading. Muscle memory comes from doing something over and over and over again so that it becomes second nature.

While we may not have firsthand experience with witnessing crucifixion, we do have far too much experience with death, with grief, with suffering, with cruelty, with despair, with hatred, with division. We cannot NOT see all the ways the world falls short of what we hope for and all the ways we fall short of what God intends. So we hit the pole, again and again and again. And we stand little chance of doing anything other than running into the pole without developing other practices and patterns. It is difficult to build that muscle memory without someone urging us to look beyond the pole or beyond the cross to embrace what comes next. Because as difficult as it is to comprehend, the cross is not the end of the story; it never has been. We know this; we are inclined to forget it, though. And so we need help building that resurrection muscle memory.

The women need that help, too, and the shiny men are there to help them. Yes, the men ask them about looking for life among the dead. They also walk them through Jesus’ own words:

Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.²

Remember how he told you... The nudge to remember is not simply about reciting facts. They invite the women to remember and receive the good news of resurrection into their very being, allowing resurrection to fill every

¹ As shared by the Rev. Jessica Tate in her paper for the Well 2024

² Luke 24: 6-7, NRSVue

cell of every muscle fiber. This remembering is not a one-time event but a practice, a spiritual discipline of rehearsing this astounding news over and over again out loud until resurrection becomes second nature, an integral part of who we are. Building resurrection muscle memory takes time and it's a group project.

In Luke's account, no one tells the women to go and tell anything to anyone. While it makes sense that they want to tell Jesus' closest friends what they have encountered, the simple act of telling the story helps the women believe the story a bit more deeply, too. Speaking the words is not a magic spell. Everywhere we look death seems to hold all the power. It was the same for the women and for Luke's first hearers. On their early morning walk to the tomb, nothing looks any different to the women's tear-soaked eyes. Crosses still stretch toward the skies. Prisoners still await Rome's fickle decisions. Soldiers stand guard on every corner. There is nothing in the immediate landscape that points to anything other than death and oppression having the final word. That is all they can see. Even after seeing the empty tomb, the women don't even have the advantage of seeing Jesus himself in Luke's telling. The larger landscape is unchanged even after they visit the empty tomb. They, however, are different. They now know that death has not won. Declaring out loud that God is stronger than death is one way the women begin to believe it. Rehearsing the astounding realization that God is stronger than death works the muscles of faith and belief and courage and hope, the very same muscles that know all too well how to grieve, how to despair, how to flinch, how to cower in fear.

Writer and theologian, Frederick Buechner once wrote, "The worst thing isn't the last thing about the world."³ That is the Easter story. That is what the women and the disciples and we are called to trust and share and live. The worst thing seems so final, so powerful. The worst thing—or things—are in our faces and in our feeds shouting down and scoffing at hope, faith, kindness, grace, justice, empathy, and love. These voices want to demand and hold my attention, so I need help remembering that *that* story is not the whole story. There are days when I struggle to see anything past the worst thing without other voices coming alongside me to remind me that death is not the last thing, that death does not have the final word. The shiny men remind the women;

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast*

the women do their best to remind the disciples; and we gather here to remind one another, again and again and again, in here so that we can hold fast to the risen One, the Living One out there.

Our larger landscape is not much changed this morning. We live and breathe and have our being among death dealing powers that insist that might makes right, that only the perfect and the pretty are worthy of love, that the least, the lost and the left out get what they deserve. These same voices too often dismiss the notion of a suffering, gentle, undaunted Savior who embraces and redeems every last one of them and every last one of us. Resurrection may not be quite second nature for us, and yet resurrection is central to who we are and whose we are. We who bear Christ's name are called to look out and up, beyond any and all obstacles that stare us down to remember, embody, and share THE story of new life, redemption, and hope for a battered world that is oh so dearly loved. The cross is central, AND the cross is empty, as is the tomb. By the grace of God, the worst thing is not the last thing. How can we not go and tell the others?

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.