

Text: Luke 24: 1-12
Title: Resurrection Remembered
Date: 04.04.10
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Duey Neil is a singer-songwriter from California who plays his guitar left handed and upside down. He is thoughtful, generous of spirit, and quick to smile and laugh.

One late-summer-Sunday Duey was here at Hope. After the sermon he got up to lead a song ~ it was a catchy tune with earnest lyrics. Duey sang his way across the bridge, and then he went back and sang it again, and again, and again, and again, and again.....

And, I wondered if this was some sort of California Taize and he was helping us find our groove before God ~ as he sang those four or five lines again, and again, and again, and again. People were puzzled, quizzical glances were exchanged, and some put their music away and folded their arms in disgust. Duey was oblivious. He was just singing away, the same thing, over and over and over and over and....

And after, oh....twenty repeats, suddenly Duey put down his guitar and went to his seat. I sprang up to offer some blessing or benediction, but within a few seconds Duey was at my side whispering, "I know who I am and I know who you are, but I don't really know what I am supposed to do." Stunned and nervous I said to him that everything was okay and that he had already done his part. A few seconds later he came back up and whispered, "I know that I'm Duey, and you're my friend, Rog, but I don't know much more than that."

We got him a circle of doctors and nurses in the Council Room. But, when I walked in a few minutes later Duey looked up and with big ol' smile said, "Hey Rog, did something happen this morning? Was I supposed to play my guitar?"

Duey would ask some variation of that question about twenty times an hour for the rest of the day. I would respond, "Duey, I am going to tell you what happened, but you won't remember what I say, and you'll be asking me again in a few minutes." And, he would say, "Well I guess if your eggs are scrambled it's good to be with a friend."

Duey was experiencing Transient Global Amnesia. In layman's terms, a part of the brain that forms memory seized up and it takes about twenty four hours for it to reboot. Duey couldn't make memory. He could recount details from years ago but he couldn't remember what happened minutes ago. It was frightening, and fascinating, and it got me thinking about memory.

Memory is somehow crucial or essential for identity.

We know who we are by what we remember.

We make decisions about the future partly based on how we understand the past.

We carry memories that shape and wound and encourage.

We pass on memories as a way to pass on identity.

We grieve when loved ones lose memory, somehow losing a part of who they are.
We connect with others through shared memory.
We remember the past as a way to define the present.
We are ~ in part~ an interconnecting web of memories.

Take this resurrection story. After chiding the women about looking for Jesus in the graveyard the two shiny messengers ask them what they remember. In their words:

Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee: The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.” Then they remembered his words.

Luke’s telling of Easter morning is not marked by trumpets or lilies or even the gentle calling of Mary’s name, but this first encounter at the empty tomb is an exercise in memory. Jesus is offstage and the women are asked to remember. Jesus is nowhere to be seen, and with little evidence but an empty tomb and their memories, the women run back to tell the men.

Can we say that in the stew of astonishment, joy, fears, tears, wonder, and memory the women at the empty tomb are the first expression of post-resurrection worship and faith?

There is no appearance but there is a query to remember.

There is an empty tomb and the recalling of words and images.

There is proclamation and memory.

And, by the way, in the next text in Luke, Jesus is veiled in some way so that the disciples on the road to Emmaus don’t recognize him as he remembers the scriptures with them. Then when he breaks the bread they recognize him, he disappears, and they remember.

There is an intimate link between faith and memory.

This morning is laced with recollections of family and childhood and some expectation of what church should be like on Easter. This morning is full of the memory of loved ones who have passed. This morning is fragile and sometimes a few notes or the turn of a lyric are all that it takes to trigger a flood of longing and memory and hope. Faith is shaped by what we remember and how we remember. And so, not unlike the women at the tomb, what we have is an empty tomb and a tradition of memory. This morning we come together in faith to remember.

Maybe that’s it! Maybe when we reenact, and retell, and remember, Jesus is alive among us. When we remember his words and his way and his essence, Jesus is alive among us.

When we follow the way of Jesus,
stumble after the steps of Jesus,
seek first the kingdom of Jesus,
celebrate the table of Jesus,
remember the resurrection of Jesus,

Jesus is alive among us. Thanks be to God!

But, resurrection must be more than memory, or in Paul's language, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all others." The resurrection must be more than a function of memory....

What we come at it this way?

We started Lent with the sobering reminder, "Remember that you are dust; and to dust you shall return." As if we need any help remembering....

The week before Lent, in the space of seven days, I did a funeral for a still born baby boy and a funeral for a woman who lived to the ripe old age of 96. One never took a breath out the womb, one breathed in and out for almost 100 years. One made a mark no matter how faint on a mother and a father; one left behind children, and grand children, and great grandchildren. Both will be remembered ~ until even those memories get dusty and fade away.

Remember that you are dust, because death and memory are natural.
It is the way of this world. We live. We remember. We die.

So, at the first light of the morning after the Sabbath the women were doing what was normal. Tears and tenderness and grief and memory mingled together, but....

But....

But...

But...

But...

But...

Like Duey Neil locked in repeat cycle, Luke's telling of the empty tomb uses the conjunction "but" at least six times in twelve verses. The word can actually be translated as "and" or "but." But, a convincing case can be made that in this passage the intention is "but." The whole passage could be translated to start with a defiant little "but."

*....they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.
But, on the first day of the week, very early in the morning...*

Now, from what I learned on School House Rock the function of "conjunction junction" is to link two phrases, and the conjunction "but" hooks together two phrases that are opposites. Luke piles up "buts" as he if can't say it loud enough, clear enough, dramatic enough: This is not normal!

It is as if Luke would grab us by the collar and proclaim:

Death is normal.

Loss is natural.

Grief is normal.

Memory is normal.

But! But, this is something wholly other, totally different, radically opposite!

It is fairly easy to think of resurrection as part of the normal weaving of life's fabric. Seasons change. Winter's death is springs rising. Last year's leaves are this year's mulch and out of that soil grows next summer's garden. Tulips emerge from their frozen winter graves. Memories are made and hope springs eternal as the Cubs take the field for another run at the pennant. It is fairly easy to think of resurrection as a normal, mundane, part of the cycle of life.

But! But, to do so is to completely miss the resurrection. It is to misunderstand, misinterpret, misplace, and dismiss the abnormal, unnatural, irrational, completely miraculous, and utterly mysterious quality of the resurrection.

There is nothing normal about the resurrection. In Karl Barth's words:

..... (resurrection) is not a natural therefore but a miraculous nevertheless....

He was dead, but nevertheless he is risen!
He was entombed, but nevertheless he is alive!
Death is normal, but nevertheless it is not final!
We shall all die, but nevertheless we will all be raised!

For, if the resurrection is just a function of memory then it is quaint and cute like Easter eggs and fuzzy bunnies. If the resurrection is simply our life together remembering then it may be warm but it is fleeting. If the journey of Jesus is just good teaching and a dramatic sacrificial death to the express the depth of God's love then may it be moving but it is finally frail and flaccid.

But, if the resurrection is more than memory?
Then it is a towering triumphant mysterious miraculous miracle.

For, what kind of God would just be a bystander to death?

But, if Jesus was dead and death couldn't hold him down....

if Jesus broke through death ~ actually, physically, rose from the dead....

Then death has no hold!

Then the grave has no victory and the tomb has no sting!

Then every shadow and every fleeting vapor, and every expression of death finally fails.

Then whatever vestige of death that has you shackled this morning it is not the end of the story.

For Jesus is alive! Not just in our memory, but somehow alive ~ even today!

Sisters and brothers, this morning we gather in the memory and the mystery of the resurrection. We read old stories, practice old rituals, and sing old songs. We remember those whom we love. We gather at a common table to "do this in remembrance." Because he lives ~ we remember.

Come to the table of life and remember that Christ our Lord has risen.

He is risen indeed. Amen.