

Text: Luke 24: 1-12
Title: Remember Resurrection
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Roger Allen Nelson

A line repeated annually about Hope Church is that “all the children are above average.” Seems true me. We have wonderful children: bright, beautiful, creative, colorful, energetic, curious, challenging, polite, and deeply loved. We are richly blessed. Thanks be to God.

Well, one of the consequences of welcoming these wonderful children to the Lord’s Table is that we’ve lost track of Profession of Faith (confirmation) as an important step in the development of identity in Christ. Profession of Faith used to come with a ticket to the magic meal; but what do you do when that’s no longer a rite of passage?

Therefore, I recently met with our high school catechism class to think about profession of faith. Their questions were honest: “Do we have to go up front? Do I have to say anything? Can we do it together?” But, there was one response that stuck with me. A delightful young man said, “I don’t want to make profession of faith until I’m 100% sure.”

100% sure...

I told him I don’t know anyone who’s 100% sure...

However, his answer got me thinking about whether we unwittingly place belief over practice ~ orthodoxy over orthopraxis. I thought of all the people for whom while trust gets deeper certainty gets more elusive. I thought of those who just can’t shake a questioning restless spirit. And I thought of how in the gospels the followers and disciples of Jesus are often confused, frightened, skeptical, and not sure....

Consider our text.

Joseph, who came from Arimathea (which was probably in the West Bank), asked Pilate’s permission to take the lifeless body of Jesus down from the cross to bury it in a tomb that he owned ~ before the Sabbath. So, by sundown on Friday Jesus is laid out and locked up in a tomb. The women who’d traveled with Jesus from Galilee saw all of this and went home to prepare the burial spices before they rested on Saturday.

On Sunday at early dawn ~ the Greek word is something like “deep” dawn ~ the women went to the tomb. There is no mention of what the men were doing. It’s the women who got up before the sun broke through ~ when everything was still opaque gray and not quite sure yet....

They found the grave open and the body gone. There were two men in dazzling clothes. The women were understandably confused and terrified. And after chiding the women about looking for Jesus in the graveyard the two shiny messengers asked 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.

Dear friends, in Luke’s telling of the resurrection 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.

In the stew of astonishment, confusion, and fear the first expression of post-resurrection faith is a function of memory. There’s no appearance but there is a query to remember. There’s proclamation and memory.

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

John Buchanan frames it this way:

What is curiously missing... is any note of celebration. There is no joyful shouting, no singing and no dancing, no trumpets and Hallelujah Chorus. Instead, thanks be to God, there is something you and I can understand: surprise, fear, skepticism, and doubt.

Maybe those of us who aren’t 100% sure this morning are in good company.

I do want to draw your attention to the link between faith and memory.

Faith is shaped by what we remember and how we remember. And so, not unlike the women at the tomb, what we proclaim is an empty tomb and a tradition of memory. We have the same raw material. This morning we come together to remember.

For when we remember the words and way of Jesus,
stumble after the steps of Jesus,
seek first the kingdom of Jesus,
celebrate the table of Jesus,
and proclaim the resurrection of Jesus,
Jesus is alive among us. Thanks be to God!

So, even if you’re not 100% sure, our invitation is to join us in remembering the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We don’t have it all figured out. But, we are a community that gathers to experience and explore a life of faith in Jesus. Again, thanks be to God.

And yet....

And yet, the resurrection must be more than just the practices of a faith community and a function of memory. Somehow the resurrection must be more than just our shared story. Somehow the resurrection is also a lived hope ~ a deep trust in a reality that reaches even beyond certainty. Otherwise we’re gathered for little more than a trip down memory lane.

Frederick Buechner in writing about the Apostle Paul's take on the resurrection puts it like this:

...when he (Paul) spoke of Jesus as raised from the dead, he meant Jesus alive and at large in the world not as some shimmering ideal of human goodness or the achieving power of hopeful thought but as the very power of life itself. If the life that was in Jesus died on the cross; if the love that was in him came to an end when his heart stopped beating; if the truth that he spoke was no more if no less timeless than the great truths of any time; if all that he had in him to give to the world was a little glimmer of light to make bearable the inexorable approach of endless night—then all was despair.

My friend, Jeff Munroe, told me of a woman diagnosed with lung cancer and given six months to live. She moves slowly, often needs oxygen, and her breathing is labored and raspy because of the scarring in her lungs from all the radiation. But two years later she's proven the doctors wrong and is still living and loving and working and....

And a few weeks ago she sat down with Jeff and said, "I have kidney cancer. It's not related to the lung cancer. I'm just genetically predisposed to get cancer. I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I need to have surgery but my doctor isn't sure I'll survive the surgery since my lungs are so bad."

Jeff sat in silence. The silence saying more than any words he could find. Finally, as tears welled up, he whispered, "I'm so sorry." She said, "Stop it. You're going to make me cry if you start crying." He tried to stop, but those tears can be hard to shut off and a few slipped down his cheek.

After a while she said, "I'm fine. I believe in the resurrection."

"I'm fine. I believe in the resurrection."

Jeff writes:

That sort of knocked me over. We finally started talking about grim subjects like do not resuscitate orders and end of life directives, and after a while she left, but I spent the rest of the day thinking about "I'm fine. I believe in the resurrection." There are about ten million miles between me saying that to her and her saying it to me. If I say it to her it's just a religious platitude thrown out in an effort to actually keep her pain and suffering at a distance. But when she says it, it's a stunning confession of faith and statement of hope in the midst of her pain. She was showing me what it means to sow tears and reap shouts of joy.

Dear friends, we join the women at the tomb this morning.

We gather in the memory and mystery of the resurrection. We read old stories, practice old rituals, and sing old songs. We gather at a common table to "do this in remembrance."

And yet, when the distance between Good Friday and Easter is long, when the sense of loss or confusion or despair is seemingly insurmountable, may we know more than religious platitude. May we know the sustaining power of God,

embodied in the resurrected Jesus Christ. May we know the deep and abiding hope that whatever vestige of death we experience it is not the end of the story. May we know, even beyond rational certainty, that Jesus is alive, not just in our memory, but alive ~ today. Thanks be to God.

So, come to the table of life and remember that Jesus Christ is risen.

Whether you're 100% sure or longing for it to be true, come.

Whether you're buoyant and joyful or still in the shadows, come.

Whether you believe the women or like Peter, you're wondering what happened, come.

Come.

I'm fine. I believe in the resurrection.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.