

## **“Remembering Resurrection”**

**Luke 23:50 - Luke 24:12**

**Rev. Andrew Connors**

**Easter Sunday**

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You do remember the story, right? Crucifixion, death, 3 days in the tomb, followed by resurrection. If you haven't learned it by now, I'm concerned. We do this every year - even did it during COVID. We get together, and tell the same story the church has been telling for a couple thousand years. Even if you haven't been here or in any church ever, the story's been so ingrained in the culture by now that it kind of makes you wonder if it's really necessary for us to go through the motions at all. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Let's all get on to brunch. No one's going to forget the resurrection story.

Yet forgetting that story is what Luke's Gospel seems most concerned about. "Remember," say those two classy-dressed angel-types at the tomb, "how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Remember. Apparently, the women - like all the rest of the disciples - have terrible memories. Even though Jesus told them about his death and resurrection at least three times according to Luke's Gospel. "[the Son of Man] will be handed over to the gentiles, and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." These aren't hints. These aren't ambiguous innuendos. Jesus was clear and direct. So how could they have forgotten?

I guess, unlike us, none of the disciples in the story including these first female witnesses - none of them had two thousand years of cultural history to bring resurrection to mind. Since the resurrection wasn't a holiday they celebrated every year, I guess it's possible that they just forgot. But also unlike us, they had heard this would happen from the lips of Jesus himself. "Remember how *he* told *y'all*." - the more accurate translation from the Greek. And how could anyone forget such a significant prediction, made on three separate occasions when everything else about that prediction - the handing over to the gentiles, the mocking, and the insulting, and the spitting, and the flogging, and the killing - had all just happened? How could you forget Jesus himself predicting his own death and resurrection and not come back to the tomb with at least a tiny nugget of hope, however small, that it might just happen? Even if you were skeptical about resurrection, how could you not even mention it to your fellow disciples. "Hey, I know this sounds crazy, but remember how Jesus told us after the convicting, and the mocking and the beating and the killing that he would rise from the dead?"

I don't find it credible at this point in the story that they would have forgotten something as significant as this, which makes me wonder if Luke has something else in mind when it comes to remembering. Something more than, or other than just content recall. We've learned a lot about how our memory works since the time of Jesus. It's not a singular mechanism. It's a batch of systems working together. And cognitive science distinguishes between two kinds of memory functions - a declarative memory used to retrieve specific information from the past and a procedural memory that is content-free when it comes to conscious memory retrieval.

It's this second memory function that is responsible for all kinds of actions that we take without being conscious of the content of the memories that produce the actions themselves. Take driving, for example. When you get in a car to drive, your brain is relying on past experiences without consciously recalling any of those actual experiences. Or when you play an instrument, your brain is relying on those past experiences without your conscious awareness of any of the content of those previous practice sessions. As is probably obvious to some of you, this procedural memory system is way more powerful than the declarative one. It's this system that makes your responses to other people and the world fairly autonomous, running whatever scripts and programs that got wired into your self, many of which were based on experiences so early in your development that you were never conscious of them at all. The strength of this memory system is that it operates mostly at the unconscious level, and this is also what makes it so difficult to change.<sup>1</sup>

So if you're a people pleasing person, for example, who wants to be more assertive, you can't just decide one day - I think I'll be more assertive. You've got to go through the painful process of digging out that code that makes you feel safest or happiest or best loved through your people-pleasing and work to rewire it over time. Or if you're an anxious person who has trouble feeling comfortable in public situations, you can't just reason your way into deciding to feel a different way. You've got to get at that deeper memory system that keeps you on your anxious autopilot even when you know you want to be flying free on your own. Or if you're a racially prejudiced person; the classic example I've witnessed is being the only white person on a team made up of all people of color, meeting with another white person who only makes eye contact with me. If you want to change any of these ways of living in the world, you've got to get to that deeper procedural memory that keeps you doing the same things you don't want to be doing, living the same ways you don't want to be living, repeating the same behaviors you don't want to be repeating.

Like disciples who know the content of what Jesus told them about resurrection, but have been wired to live as though it is not possible. I think that's the sort of memory that Luke is getting at. Surely the women at the tomb and the disciples behind closed

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<sup>1</sup> Fonagy, P. (1999). "Memory and Therapeutic Action," *International Journal for Psycho-Analysis*, 80:215-223.

doors, and those two disciples we'll hear about in a couple of weeks on the road to Emmaus all remember Jesus's words about resurrection. Someone telling you about resurrection is not something you would forget. Someone predicting their own resurrection is most certainly not something you would forget. But because resurrection is not part of your basic procedural memory, not part of your normal ways of living, not part of the assumptions that undergird your way of being in the world, it's not going to impact your behavior in any meaningful way. Which is exactly what Luke is worried about in the early church.

Worried about Jesus-followers retreating back to the scripts that ran their lives before they met Jesus. The scripts telling them that Caesar does have the last word, that the healing that God promises can only be taken so far, that women disciples aren't a real thing, that hope eventually runs out, that the rich are eventually the winners who take all, that the first shall be first, and might makes right.

That's basically the world's script without resurrection. Without the unexpected overturning of what we currently know as possible, we're pretty much destined to be a nation that never passes any meaningful gun safety legislation - destined for something like more than 600 mass shootings a year, our current average. Without the unexpected overturning of what we currently know as possible, we're locked into running those old racist scripts that repeat police brutality against Black bodies, or racial disenfranchisement of Black voters and Black legislators from Nashville on down, or the redlining scripts of the past that continue to play themselves out in the disparities of wealth and health present today in our neighborhoods. Without the unexpected overturning of what we currently know as possible, we'll basically lose the planet to the coming climate catastrophe.

The difficult part of this story is that all of these outcomes are more likely than not without resurrection to interrupt what's possible. And resurrection, by its very definition, is more unlikely than not. How do we access this alternative procedural memory when, like his closest disciples, it's so much easier to let those automated scripts program us to accept death as the only possible outcome of our best hopes, to go home, lock the doors and hide from its inevitability?

I don't know. What I notice is that none of those first participants in resurrection-related activities are themselves conscious of the impact of their actions. Joseph of Arimathea hasn't said anything about resurrection. He's just doing a decent thing, and a risky one, by going to Pilate and getting permission to bury Jesus' body before sundown. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them are not expecting to find Jesus resurrected from the tomb, they're doing a decent thing, and a risky one by tending to his broken body.

God is the one doing all the difficult lifting of making possible what was unlikely before. All they have to do is show up and find out how their meager efforts might translate into a much greater impact than what they had first imagined. When Joseph

took down the body of Jesus, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid, I don't think he had any clue that taking the body, wrapping it in cloth, and laying it down is what Jesus' mother Mary did when he was born - do you remember? taking his body, wrapping in swaddling cloths, and laying it in a manger. Joseph had no idea that he was preparing Jesus -not for death -but for life! The women at the tomb had no idea they were preparing to be the very first preachers in the history of the church - proclaiming the truth of God's powerful love over death, nor did they know they would be the first but not the last to have their amazing proclamation declared b.s., which is what the word for the more sanitized translation "idle tale" actually means. The mansplained experience that most women I know have had, chosen by God as the barometer for how you know you are really proclaiming resurrection - when you hit that nerve that generates the status quo protective reaction - you know you're preaching resurrection!

All these people did was show up without any conscious choice to believe in resurrection, or preach it or enact it. In fact, the only choices it seems like they made were to show up as decent people, open to being surprised by, corrected by, used by, steered by God.

Brian McClaren calls Easter the start of the uprising and this is exactly how lots of uprisings begin.<sup>2</sup> People show up as decent people with no idea of the impact that's even possible, open to participating with hope and finding out where it will lead them. Students who show up as decent people in the legislative house in Nashville preparing to be used by hope with no idea of where it might lead. Many of you who showed up on the doorsteps of some of our newest immigrant neighbors with nothing more than an openness to meet the presence of God in our newest neighbors. Some of you who are preparing to show up and teach our kids in the fall, or serving in leadership of our church, or befriending the most recent sojourner to the very front doors of the church, or standing together with other people of faith at BUILD actions with no sense of whether your presence will mean anything to anybody.

This is how the uprising of God's way of love and justice in the world begins - not necessarily with people who already "believe" in the resurrection, although that never hurts. But people who saw how radical Jesus' ways of loving yourself and others all the way down to your roots could be for yourself and for the world and show up wanting to be a part of it.

And despite two thousand years of telling this story I know our world still hasn't learned it beyond the declarative, content-recall level. We still operate as though hope is dead, retaliation is the way to justice, war is what we have to settle for, despair is to be expected. We desperately need to go through the motions of our Easter story each and every year - no make that each and every week - so we can rewrite our private and public scripts that leave too many of us acting as though the world or we cannot

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<sup>2</sup> Brian McClaren, *We Make This Road By Walking*, (New York: Jericho Books), 2014, pp. 167-170.

change, as though none of our efforts make a difference, as though Caesar does have the last word, that the healing that God promises can only be taken so far, that women disciples aren't a real thing, that hope eventually runs out, that the rich are eventually the winners who take all, that the first shall be first, and might makes right.

We need to remember. Remember resurrection is not only possible, it's promised by the God who is in the business of rewriting those old, automatic scripts of hopelessness, with alternative programming of hope, scripts of peace, narratives of justice. Remember at the deepest levels possible so that wherever death is most present, wherever hope is most out of reach, wherever fear is most palpable, we too can show up with little more than a desire to be decent people open to the possibility of a just and healing future. The good news -from the state house in Nashville to the street of the city, from the rooms in the ICU to the front doors of the church, from whatever ending seems untraversable - the good news is that God is the one who does the heavy lifting. Remember how he told y'all? Remember how he told y'all.