

Sermon 4-20-25

Paul Purdue preaching

As a preacher, I have been guilty of being so caught up in Easter Joy that I've run right past the details of the resurrection story, especially the grief. Luke kind of slow-walks the resurrection story, letting the Good News move from the angel message to the breaking of bread and then through the book of Acts. The Easter story really begins on Good Friday, Jesus said "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing" and then Luke reports that Jesus cried out in a loud voice "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit". (Luke 23) As Jesus drew his last breath the Roman Centurion overseeing the executions spoke up, not the callous words one might expect from one assigned such dehumanizing duty, but words of comfort, reverently confessing, "Certainly this man was innocent." (Matthew's Centurion confesses "Truly this man was God's Son!") The crowd "gathered for the spectacle" trickled home with heavy heartbeats.

Jesus' followers, daughters, sisters, aunts, mothers remained, standing silently, observing. Maybe Peter's bitter tears overwhelmed him, but only female disciples and maybe John kept watch to the end. They watched Joseph of Arimathea present papers from Pilate taking charge of Christ's body. Do we remember that a member of the religious council that orchestrated Jesus' death made Jesus' funeral arrangement? What do you do when you vehemently disagree with something your people have done? Joseph could not make it right, but he did get the paperwork to take Christ's body down off the cross, buy a special linen cloth, gently wrap up Jesus' body, and lay it in his own rock-hewn mausoleum. I imagine Joseph wept as he prayed the 23rd Psalm and the Mourner's Kaddish over Jesus.

The sun was setting. The Sabbath was beginning. Seeing Jesus' body sealed in the tomb, Mary, Magdalene, Martha, Salome, and Joanna walked home and began preparing fragrant lotions to give Jesus a proper burial. They stayed together, beginning the work of grief together. When everything falls apart, so often we pull back from community, but these wise women show us grief's better pathway: community, engagement, ritual, and worship.

What did they talk about as they pressed mint, lavender, and frankincense into lotions and balms? Were they cynical or comforted that a member of the Council made arrangements for Jesus? Were they angry that an agent of the empire declared Jesus' innocent? Did they remember Jesus' words about love, enemies, and forgiveness?

Mary, Magdalene, Salome, Joanna lost their rabbi, pastor, teacher, comforter, advocate, counsellor, guide, prophet, and friend. Jesus' presence always helped them find God's presence. Jesus had lifted up children, embraced outcasts, welcomed strangers, healed sick folks, calmed frenzied spirits, resisted oppression, radiated compassion, embodied forgiveness, incarnated peace, catalyzed love, and filled their living rooms with hope. Jesus had offered grace over meals, blessed their children, petted their dogs and scratched behind their cats ears.

Jesus was gone. Not only was Jesus gone, the way Jesus died haunted them: evil, injustice, oppression, jealousy, Judas' kiss, torches and swords, Peter's denial, police brutality, 30 pieces of silver, judicial misconduct, church hypocrisy, crucifixion! Lord, in your mercy.

Luke slow-walks the resurrection. Two disciples walk along the road to Emmaus. They describe Jesus to a Jesus (Come-As-Stranger) "as a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people" and how "our chief priests and leaders handed Jesus over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that Jesus was the one to liberate Israel." They are angry and hurting. "We had hoped"

The women walk towards the tomb, towards grief. They will find Jesus. They had made perfumed soaps to wash the blood from Jesus' hair and cover him in lavender. Maybe they carried dandelion necklaces their daughters strung together. Our embodied prayers bring healing and hope. These rituals, remembrances, and memorials resist evil, by stealing back the last word from the empire. Love wins when we remember Jesus, Dr. King, or George Floyd's life. Our good works remake reality, they reorder a broken world, moving us closer to belovedness, holiness and humanity. Good deeds keep a pathway to faith, hope and love open.

On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. When everything seems to be falling apart, they keep the sabbath, they keep their faith. I listened to Mavis Staples sing "This Little Light of Mine" on the way in: the road is dark, the way is long, keep on singing that freedom song... Don't not give up, don't back down, don't let the liar turn you around". They kept the faith, in faithless times

Perhaps, keeping the faith makes us faithful. We often think that inner faith empowers outer faithfulness, but maybe, faithful action restores our faith. Making spiced lotions can keep us in faith. Faith can inspire prayer, but liturgies awaken faith. Lighting a candle can let our little light shine. Serving rekindles our connection to the community. Giving makes us generous. Forgiving brings forgiveness. A hopeful word turns back our toxic cynicism. Keeping the faith, in faithless times, may be the way we find our faith. These women keep the faith when their hearts are breaking, they do not seek blessings but to become the blessing.

After the Sabbath, together they head to the tomb at "deepest dawn". Mark tells us they problem-solved as they walked discussing how to roll the stone away. When they arrived the stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty. The missing stone may not have felt like Good News as they wondered who did this, Graverobbers, enemies or weirdos? Could they endure one more cruel twist?

Suddenly two angels in dazzling clothes stood beside the women and asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? Christ is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you that he must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again." How smart are angels anyway, asking these silly and

borderline shaming “why” questions? Where else should the women look for Jesus? Despite their know-it-all air, the angels give us a beautiful word: “Remember”. Remember, Jesus! “Remember how Jesus spoke to you...”. Luke tells us “The women remembered Jesus' words.”

“Everytime you eat this bread and drink this cup remember.” ( 1 Corinthians 11) Remember your baptism and be thankful. In Acts 11, Peter remembered Jesus' words when he ruled that “all means all”. (That is a rough paraphrase) Remembering is richer than any event, story or video. Remembering is deeply personal. You and a friend may watch the same sunset, ball game, or child run skipping across a playground and take to heart very different images and values. God is in our remembering. Remembering invites us beyond simple observation into deeper, more sacred, holy, and human waters. Remembering can be a kind of prayer: holy, mysterious, and healing. Remember how Jesus told us. Remember you are beloved.

Luke, perhaps beholden to Theophilus or unaware of his patriarchal blindspot, fails to tell us how the Risen Christ actually appeared to Magdalene, Mary, Joanna and Salome. Matthew and John make clear that Jesus not only appeared to Magdalen and her crew but Jesus commissioned them in the first ordination class,(all female) ordaining them on Easter to preach the Good News that “Christ is Risen”. Instead, Luke tells us when they shared the Good News, the disciples could not believe it, perhaps not because the preachers were all women. but because miracles are an unexpected reversal of the natural order. Peter, not yet believing, runs to the tomb, but sees nothing but an empty tomb. For whatever reason the angels do not show up for Peter. Peter will see the Risen Christ and come to believe and then the rest of the guys will believe him! Sad

If we keep reading we will see that Luke slow-walks the resurrection. The angels speak to the women. Two disciples walk away but bump into Jesus (Who Comes As Stranger). Together they debate the Scriptures, ask questions, and remember. They keep the faith, offering Jesus (Come As Stranger) food and lodging. As Jesus-Come-As-Stranger breaks the bread, the two disciples see Jesus and remember!.

Today, I do not know where you are on the spectrum between doubts and beliefs, faith and indifference, dread and engagement, trust and cynicism, hope and despair, death and resurrection, but I am so glad that you are here. I am glad you are here today remembering Jesus, raising your alleluias, remembering your baptism.

When we remember Jesus, when we remember to keep the faith: to forgive one more time, feed hungry people, welcome strangers, offer healthcare, resist injustice, embrace immigrants, and love unconditionally Jesus shows up with us right here in Nashville! Remember Jesus. Raise your Hallelujah Remember Jesus how Jesus speaks, so that Jesus can show in us, for us and through us. Amen