

March 30, 2013  
The Great Vigil of Easter, Year C

“Remembering the Important Things”

David Baylor

*Genesis 1:1 – 2:2*  
*Psalm 33:1-11*  
*Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21*  
*Isaiah 4:2-6*  
*Psalm 122*  
*Ezekiel 37:1-14*  
*Psalm 143*  
*Isaiah 43:1-7*  
*Psalm 29*  
*Romans 6:3-11*  
*Luke 24:1-12*

Alleluia! The LORD is Risen! [The LORD is Risen indeed! Alleluia!]

I have a memory problem. Don't be alarmed. It's not a diagnosed, clinical thing, and it doesn't impair my day to day activities. I still remember most names and faces, my log in IDs and passwords and PIN codes for online banking and debit card transactions. I also have full access to a mental hard drive bursting with phone numbers, hymns, prayers, and various bits of liturgy and stuff like that.

No, this memory problem is what I guess I would call spiritual dementia – an inability to stay more conscious, moment to moment, of things I really need to remember more consistently as a spiritual person, crucial things like the stories and lessons and wisdom and insight that are part of what we are doing here tonight. That's why the Great Vigil has always been so important to me.

Hearing all these parts of our history as a people of God reminds us of where we come from, and how we arrive at the scene we've just encountered in Luke's Gospel. In fact, reconnecting us to the historical thread that stitches us together as a community of faith is pivotal to why we revisit these stories again on this special night.

At the same time, however, the fact that we are aware of the larger reach of this thread markedly sets us apart from the people in these stories. From our vantage point two thousand years later, we can see each of these stories in the context of both what preceded a particular event in the lives of those people, as well as what comes after. But for Mary Magdalene and the other women in Luke's story, and for the disciples whom they told what has happened to them, there is not yet the road to Emmaus or any of the other events of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearance, as well as no Ascension or Pentecost or anything else that we hear about year in and year out. So to really appreciate the significance of that event to the characters in this drama, we need to isolate the facts in this account from what we already know.

For instance, here in 2013 we know what really awaited these women as they journeyed through the early morning mists to embalm the body of their beloved friend and Master. But for them, in their “here and now,” they expected something else altogether. In one way, they were more in the dark than they could even imagine. They thought they were going to the place of the dead; going to visit a tomb, not going to view life, but to see and touch death. What they actually encountered, however, was something entirely different, something absolutely alien and incomprehensible to their previous experience and their understanding of how the world works.

Today we recognize and greet this moment with shouts of “Alleluia, The LORD is Risen!” [wait for the response]. But all those women knew was that the tomb was open and the body they had come to honor was nowhere to be found. And then their confusion was further compounded by the terrifying appearance of the two men in dazzling raiment who asked, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

Now what we hear next suggests that these women might also have been suffering from a memory problem similar to what I alluded to above. Oh, they certainly remembered Jesus’ passion and death and the removal of his body to the tomb, all of which they had just witnessed. And from what they had brought with them that morning – “the spices they had prepared” – we know that they clearly remembered what one does to embalm a body, and that this was their mission. But it took the two angelic figures to remind them that the one they were seeking had told them, “while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

The fact that the disciples seemed not to “get it” when the women related their experience might suggest that the eleven in the Upper Room also failed to remember the same words of Jesus.

Well, I’ve known for more than a week how I wanted to conclude this reflection, so let me move to do that now with a small bit of dialogue from a scene from Franco Zeffirelli’s wonderful movie, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Those of you who came to our wonderful Lenten series on Jesus and the Movies with Jim Friedrich may remember this. When Jim showed this clip last Wednesday, it affected me profoundly, in part because I already knew I would be preaching tonight from Luke’s account of the Resurrection, but also because the treatment of this particular scene in this movie is such a powerful depiction of this part of the Easter story.

The script draws from accounts of the Resurrection in other gospels as well, and also some degree of invention or inspiration. But as in the account from Luke, the movie treats the disciples’ reaction to the report of the women as either an “idle tale” or “women’s fantasies.”

We pick up the story where Mary has decided that their reaction to what she is trying to tell them indicates there is no reason to waste any more breath with this bunch on this subject. As she prepares to leave, she gives the disciples a hard look, and going to the door, turns to say that the Jesus she encountered in the garden “told me to tell you, and I have done so” and then slams the door and departs.

Thomas, of course, is as doubtful as ever, and visibly cynical. He turns from one disciple to another and asks: “Do you believe her story? Do you, Andrew? Do you, James? And you, Matthew? And you, Peter?”

Peter is quiet for a moment, and then we hear, “Yes. “

Even more incredulous, Thomas retorts, “How can you?”

Peter replies, “Because he said so, because he wanted it to be so. He wanted everything to happen just as it did. And I have always believed him.”

Thomas comes back again: “But, Peter, you denied him – you denied him three times.”

And Peter’s response is both dagger and salve: “Yes, I denied him because I was a coward. We are all cowards. We accuse Judas of being a betrayer but we all betrayed him, we all abandoned him. At least our brothers in the Sanhedrin who condemned him didn’t know him. The Romans did not know him. But we – we ate with him, we lived with him, we knew he was the Christ, and still we betrayed him. Brothers, can’t you see? You asked me if I believe he has risen. Yes, I do. For I know in my heart he would not abandon us. I know in my heart he has forgiven me – us – forgiven all of us.”

I find that I’ve “remembered” this scene each time I’ve come to the altar these past two weeks.

I expect to do so again in a just a few minutes when we celebrate the Eucharist, which has remembrance at its very core.

And in the final analysis, I guess I won’t even expect to remember everything I have heard this night. There will be other chances, God willing. But at least I can try to remember what Peter affirms here – that we are forgiven, one and all. Forgiven not because of anything we have done or ever could do. No, simply forgiven because of the eternal love of God in Christ that holds and enfolds us, the love that through the Resurrection made that moment the first day of a new Creation.

And you know, perhaps remembering only this is to remember everything after all . . . .

Amen.

Alleluia! The LORD is Risen. [The LORD is Risen indeed! Alleluia!]