

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day/March 27, 2016

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We are not told what the women thought on that first Easter morning. They were all business. Maybe they were numb. They had seen Jesus flogged to within an inch of his life. They watched as he stumbled along the way of sorrows with Simon of Cyrene carrying his cross behind him. Perhaps they heard Jesus cry out the words of the 31st Psalm, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." It had been a traumatic few days. Trauma can numb our emotions and take away our memory. The women don't even plan how to remove the stone covering the tomb, but find it already rolled away. No questions asked. Now we begin to get some emotion. They were perplexed to find the body gone from the tomb. They meet two men in dazzling clothes. It terrifies them. They are having an intense mystical experience. What they take from this, counter to the amnesia of trauma, is the instruction to "remember." Then they remembered the narrative of betrayal, death, and at the end God would raise Jesus to new life. The narrative expressed a pattern of salvation. Fear and brokenness cannot stop the divine drive toward freedom and a love that is stronger than death. "Remember how he told you..." say the two men who have been sent from God.

We know something about trauma. Post traumatic stress has come into our lexicon. Some of us have known what it is to be robbed; others have endured tragic loss; domestic violence is not unheard of. Anxiety is pervasive. One observer writes, there is a "vast ocean of anxiety that is white-capping in our society." 24-hour breaking news seems to feed and feed on this anxiety. I suppose this is not entirely new. A tenth-century monk wrote, "In the midst of life we are in death." He was watching builders construct a bridge over a deep chasm. Anxiety develops whenever we perceive a threat, whether that threat is real or imagined. On Tuesday a terrorist attack left 31 people dead in Brussels

and 300 more wounded. That was all too real. All of this trauma-induced anxiety can leave us numb. We may lose touch with the narrative that makes us who we are.

Remember, say the two men in the empty tomb. Listen, says Peter to the Gentiles, and he repeats the narrative told to the women. God anointed Jesus with Holy Spirit and energy. He went about doing good and healing all. They put him to death, but God raised him up on the third day. And to this moment we are directed to tell the story. Why? What on earth does it mean to remember it? First, Peter says, it means that God shows no partiality. We do not serve God by creating exclusivist tribes or Caliphates. All who do good and reverence God are acceptable. The story of the Good Samaritan who cared for the wounded, traumatized victim by the side of the road is the story of an outsider who showed what it means to be a neighbor. The healing of lepers by Jesus is another account of the inclusion of outsiders, as well as his encounters with numerous tax collectors and sinners. Forgiveness is offered to all.

Paul to the Corinthians puts the story in ultimate terms. With Christ's resurrection, the future fulfillment of compassion and life bursts into the present. All will be made alive in Christ. And to make sure we don't miss the point, he says, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Not "will be" but "is." Christ's resurrection is only the beginning, but it brings into our present, values of life, acceptance, inclusion, neighborliness, forgiveness, compassion, and gives them all ultimate value. This is what life is about. Don't forget it. Remember.

Of course, Paul says, without the resurrection life's destiny is death. Then there is no fulfillment of justice and mercy, no completion of compassion, and we are most to be pitied. If we forget the Jesus narrative we are under the thrall of death's fear; at the mercy of terrorism. When death is ultimate the values are: control, uniformity, the destruction of foreign and even ancient cultures, compliance. These values are all fear-based. When we forget the narrative of resurrection, this is what we are left with.

The trauma of terrorism is never acceptable. We dare not normalize it so that it becomes an allowable part of ordinary life. We should take every measure to prevent it. When it happens it may help us identify with others who share in life's suffering. We are certainly not alone. We also may become aware of a choice. Which narrative will we believe? We can cling harder and harder to our need to be in control and invulnerable. Or we can remember that by acknowledging our vulnerability we can give room to what's there around us. Find breathing space. When the fearful, panicky parts of ourselves want nothing better than to flee, pause, pay attention; remember the Jesus story – the possibility of new life, of the ultimate importance of compassion and justice, the need of the person next to you, the fear that needs to be looked at, acknowledged and calmed (not denied).

The Easter story both sustains us and guides us. I will sometimes ask people to remember when they have had an experience of God. I will preface the question by saying this is probably something no one has ever asked you before, so if nothing comes to mind it is okay. But a fair number of people will have had an experience of God at the loss of a loved one. It is a profound experience, maybe even mystical. When we remember God at a moment like that, it is healing. We begin to see that our life fits the pattern of salvation. It goes from Good Friday to Easter, from loss to healing, from trauma to resilience. Remember, the women are told, don't allow trauma to numb your emotions or take away your memory. Tell the story and see how it fits into the pattern of salvation. Remember the Jesus story how he went about doing good and healing all. That's your story. Don't forget it. It is healing.

The Easter story is also our guide. It points out what is ultimately important to us. Death is destroyed. Its fear need no longer rule us. There is a divine energy field that draws all things toward a love mightier than death. The Easter story is our north star. It guides us toward freedom and life. We are drawn to communion with one another. We hold a vision as a parish that, "We are a diverse community where people of difference, be it great or small, can stand as one before God at the altar of Saint Paul's Church." God shows no partiality as Peter said. "Remember" is the instruction given at the empty tomb. Remember that Jesus must rise again. Remember, we live in the present

by the values of the life to come. That is why they are ultimate: compassion, forgiveness, inclusion, abundant life. These are what guide us. They sustain us. This is the Easter story. Remember.

Amen.