

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010

For the children: [*holding up an Easter Egg*]. What am I holding in my hand? An Easter Egg...yes. What do you think might be inside this egg? Candy? A treat of some kind? That is what you'd expect to find in such an egg on a day like today. Let's look inside and see what is really in there. [*open the egg*]. There's nothing in the egg. No candy. That's kind of sad. Well don't worry. We'll have plenty more eggs after the service and I promise there will be candy in them. I wanted to show you this empty egg, because it is a lot like the story we heard this morning. Jesus had many friends and followers. When he died on the cross, a lot of them went to hide, because they were afraid that they might get into trouble for being friends with Jesus. But there were some women, one of them was called Mary Magdalene, who were not afraid to be seen with Jesus. They were even brave enough to go and care for his body after it had been put into the tomb. Do you know what a tomb is? Well it might look something like this [*hold up the model of the tomb*]. It's kind of like a cave, and there was a big rock rolled in front of the cave. When Mary and the other women came to the tomb on Easter morning, they thought they were going to find a tomb with a big rock and the body of Jesus inside...just like we thought there might be candy inside this egg. But when they reached the tomb, it was empty...just like this egg. They were really confused, kind of like we were about the egg. An Easter egg is supposed to have candy inside it. The tomb was supposed to have Jesus inside it. But two messengers from God appeared to the women and told them that they would not find Jesus in the tomb. "He has risen" they said. They told the women to remember how Jesus had said he would have to die and then rise again. Today, Easter, we remember that God always keeps God's promises. We remember God's power is greater than any pain or death. We remember that sometimes we think we know where to find good things (like we thought we knew there would be good and tasty candy in this egg). But sometimes we end up looking in the wrong place. This Easter Day, we remember that what is really good, really sweet, really wonderful, is not candy (even though candy is nice). What is really good and sweet and wonderful is God's love and God's power. It is greater than we can even imagine. Great enough to win over any bad thing. Great enough to find us when we are lost. Great enough to bring life and joy even when everything seems to be terrible. I hope you enjoy your Easter, and if you have some candy, I hope it reminds you of the sweet and powerful love of Jesus. Say thank you to God, and share that love (and your candy) with each other. You can go back to your seats, and I am going to say a few things to the older people.

As I said to the children, Easter is a day of remembering. Remembering things is not always my strength. A parishioner sent me a cartoon that reminds me of the humor and tragedy of forgetfulness. The cartoon depicts two dinosaurs standing on the peak of a mountain surrounded by water and rain. They are looking across the water at what is clearly Noah's ark floating away. One dinosaur says to the other, "Oh! Was that today?" Oops. We chuckle, because we are often forgetful, sometimes of the most important things and people in our lives. We forget birthdays and anniversaries. We forget to call or return emails. We forget to pray. We even forget to come to church (and I say this as someone who has, in the course of my life, forgotten to come to church more times than I'd care to admit. Of course, that was before my present occupation!). We chuckle, secretly hoping that our forgetfulness will not be a matter of life and death.

In Luke's Gospel account which we just heard, his telling of that Easter morning, Mary Magdalene and the women come to the tomb expecting to find the body of Jesus. And there is a detail about them that is not recounted in any of the other Gospel stories about that morning. The

women remember. They remember. The text tells us that the two heavenly messengers remind the women of Jesus' words. The Son of Man would have to be handed over to sinners and be crucified and then rise on the third day. The next sentence says, "Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest." Then they remembered. The implication, of course, is that these women, indeed all the disciples, had forgotten his words. They had suffered some sort of amnesia. The shock of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion had been a concussion to the mind and heart. Or perhaps they had never remembered. Jesus' predictions about how he would have to surrender himself and be executed then rise again might have gone over their heads the first few times. Too incomprehensible to stick in the memory.

We, like those disciples, have trouble remembering that surrender and death must precede new life and resurrection. It goes right over our heads. This morning, this Easter Morning, I invite us to remember. Remember that God wins the battle against sin and death first through giving up. Jesus goes through death in order to conquer it. Remember. Literally re-member, put the pieces back together again. Remember that the tomb was empty. Remember that sometimes when things are at their lowest, that is the moment when resurrection is most likely. Put it together that when we let go and allow something to die, new life can and will rise. Remember that God has the power to do more than we can ask or imagine. Don't worry if you have trouble believing. Don't worry if it doesn't make any sense. Just remember.

In many ways, the story of God's people is a story of remembering and forgetting and remembering again. From the beginning, God has told us what to expect, and we forget. God has told us, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, that God "is about to create new heavens and a new earth, the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." And so remembering is not just recalling the past, not a nostalgic walk down memory lane. Remembering is putting the pieces together again so that we can walk down a new path of God's making. We remember that, with God, we have an incredible present and future.

But it is hard to remember. After a busy Holy Week, I am likely to forget my own sermon by this afternoon, so I won't hold it against you if you have trouble as well! The good news is that God knows our forgetfulness. God has given us ways to remember: scripture and sacraments and signs. God has sent messengers to remind us: apostles, prophets, and martyrs. It seems appropriate to recall one such prophet on this day, April 4. You may remember that today is the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. How fitting for an Easter Day to remember that out of tragic murder, new life can arise. King was killed for his faithful witness to God and God's justice. Through the power of God his witness rises again and again, challenging us to remember the Gospel. King was killed on April 4, 1968. A year earlier, on April 4, 1967, he gave a speech entitled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." He not only spoke against war but pleaded more broadly for what he called, "A radical revolution of values." Forty-three years ago, King called the world to remember the power of love. He said, and I quote, "When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life." King was speaking of love which has the power to lay down its life and pick it up again. Love powerful enough to defeat the humiliation of the violent cross with the peaceful quiet of an empty tomb. Love powerful enough to make a wolf to feed with the lamb. Love powerful enough to restore the memories of forgetful sinners. King was speaking 43 years ago, but it could have been yesterday. We still suffer from what King called "a proneness to adjust to injustice." We still experience an unfortunate amnesia about the suffering of others. I wish I had time this morning to go down the list of all the people and places that we need to remember in our world. We could begin the list but would forget the first names by the time we reached the last.

And so although I spoke earlier to the children of the sweetness of God's love, I must also say that God's love is indeed sweet, but it is bittersweet. Bitter in that we often forget just how powerful it can be. Bitter in that we too often forget to share that love with each other. Bitter to us that we suffer from amnesia and cannot remember the new creation God promises. Bittersweet that in a world broken by sin, that too often forgets the power of God, God works miracles anyway. Bittersweet that though our forgetfulness should be cause for our death, God always offers us life. When I want to remember something, I sometimes write it on my hand. Write this on our hearts. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Write it, recite it, tell it. Tell it to your children and your children's children. Tell it to each other. Tell it to the whole world. We are witnesses of these things, St. Peter says. And children, tell it to the grown ups. This past week, a child from the St. Luke's preschool delivered an Easter egg to my office. She had dyed it herself. I was out at the time, and the child, her name is Judah, left the egg with Kathy Barnes, our parish administrator. When I returned, Kathy gave me the egg and said that Judah had spoken these words, "Tell Pastor Joe that Christ is risen." Thanks, Judah. With God's help, we will remember.