

April 21, 2019

Luke 24: 1-12

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Remember to Believe”

One of the things we often say in the aftermath of a tragedy or loss is, “Life goes on.” “Life goes on,” we say but we don’t say these words with a sense of victory. Not really. It’s more like we resign ourselves to the fact that things just keep rolling. No matter how deep the loss or how tough the tragedy, even a death, we know life keeps going and at some point we’ll have to pick it up and get back in the flow. This can be difficult because we need time. We need time to come to grips with what’s happened and time to figure out how the pieces will fit back together. But, like we say, life goes on. I was thinking about this in regards to the women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning. Just a bit earlier in Luke’s Gospel we’re told these same women watched as the body of Jesus was wrapped in linen clothes and laid in the tomb. Right away, we’re told, the women began to prepare the spices and oils that were used at the time of burial. I wonder what they were feeling, as they did the customary task that was expected of them. Maybe the fact their hands kept busy helped take their minds off of the great loss that weighed on them at Jesus’ death. Given this possibility, Luke tells us the women stopped their work of preparing the spices because the Day of Sabbath had begun. You see, the crucifixion was on Friday. The Jewish Sabbath was on Saturday. So, as the time rolled past midnight, from Friday into Saturday morning, the observance of Sabbath began. The religious rule did not allow any work on the Sabbath day, not even preparation of the body of a loved one. Let’s think about this. The crucifixion, Jesus’ death on the cross, was one of the most tragic events in history. The women had shared life with him. They had learned from him. They followed him. Imagine what they were feeling as they watched him die and saw his body laid to rest. What confusion and despair. Staying busy by preparing the spices probably helped but they couldn’t even do that on the Sabbath day, and why? Well, life goes on. Tradition is tradition. The religious commands around Sabbath were not laid aside for any one or for any reason. So, the women stopped their work. They rested and waited. They observed the rule of Sabbath the day after the crucifixion just as they always did. As that 24 hours of forced stillness descended upon them all the women could do was hold the heaviness of their grief.

Come Sunday morning, as soon as there was enough light to see their way, the women picked up the spices and got back to their work. Life goes on. There was a job to be done. The Sabbath pause was over and the women were back in the flow. If all that awaited them was business as usual we would not be here this morning. If life had simply gone on as usual there would be no Easter. Instead, we gather in great hope today because what the women found at the tomb changed everything. Their plan to respond to death in the usual way came face to face with the power of the resurrection. If it was only left to us then the best we can hope for is to keep things going. Death is death. The end is the end. We do what we can and then get back in the flow the best that we can. That’s what the women were trying to do. Instead, that morning God brought Easter faith into being. Let’s be clear. Death is still death but what seems to be our end is not the end in God’s hands. The women stood there holding their spices and oils when the messengers said, “Why do you look for the living among the dead. He is not here. He is risen.” Every Easter we proclaim this truth. He is risen! The Easter message proclaims that when everything seems to be lost, when there are no more options on the table, when there are no possibilities and nothing we do will change what’s happened, God brings new life. We gather today not to say to each other, “Life goes on.” We gather to take up the glad shout, “He lives!” We are an Easter people because of what God can do. What God did in Jesus God does in us. When death comes, and it will, God gathers up the ashes of our earthly lives and makes us into a new creation. Easter is new life. Easter is a new love. I think the women must have dropped the burial spices and oils right there at the opening to the tomb. He was not there. He is risen. God helps us let go of everything that would keep us in death’s grip. Christ is risen and because he lives we will live also.

Easter is not just remembering what happened that first day of resurrection. Easter is experiencing the power of new life now. This past week the whole world watched in stunned sadness as fire destroyed significant portions of The Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. These kinds of events remind us of the vulnerability of our human experience. As the spire of the church crashed to the ground in flames it seemed clear, the end is the end. But in the hands of God new life is always possible. It is nothing short of resurrection power that the commitment was made the next day that a new Notre Dame will rise from the ashes. I felt this same kind of resurrection spirit when I watched another news story this past week that connects to a somber memory. Yesterday was the 20th anniversary of the tragedy at Columbine High School. Twelve students and one teacher lost their lives back in 1999. The report I saw brought together some of the survivors and two of those were Craig Scott and his mother. They lost his sister and her daughter, Rachel, that day. It’s the power of resurrection that has given Craig the strength to organize a program he calls “Rachel’s Challenge.” Through this program Craig has spoken to over 1 million young people

about discovering hope and courage in their own lives. In God's hands the end is never the end. And then, I saw another story. This time it was the image of a veteran soldier who crawled across the finish line of the Boston Marathon last Tuesday. Maybe you heard this story, too. Micah Hendron is a former Marine, from Ohio, and served in Afghanistan. Micah and three others were in the same vehicle the day they ran over an explosive device. The three were killed. Micah survived. He ran the Boston Marathon in honor and memory of his fallen friends, but his legs cramped up so solidly that with about 100 yards to go he couldn't even walk. He fell to the ground and began what's called a "low crawl," pulling his body along using only his arms. Slowly he was able to get to his hands and knees and he finished the race by crawling across the finish line. As he did so, those who were nearby hear him repeating aloud the names of his fallen friends. Where does that kind of strength and fortitude come from? In no way is this business as usual. You can't look at what that Marine did and say, "Well, life goes on." It's resurrection power that gives birth to something new. What comes to life is a deeper courage and a stronger determination, and a love that can not be defeated. God makes the impossible possible.

Resurrection power is as real now as it was that first Easter morning but just speaking these words isn't enough. Easter waits for our response. When the women told the disciples what they'd experienced Luke says the disciples thought it was an idle tale. It sounded too crazy to be true. Peter ran to look for himself but even in his amazement at the empty tomb he just went back home. This is Luke's way of saying Peter resigned himself to business as usual. Life just goes on. No. Easter waits for our response and that's why the gospel invites us to believe. Believing isn't just remembering the story. In the world of the gospel, believing is living the story, experiencing the power of resurrection in our lives and embracing the new life possible for us in Christ.

He lives and there is nothing usual or routine about it. Wherever in your life it seems like a dead end, or what's done is done, or there are no more options or possibilities, believe. Remember, Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and I am life." We believe it and we live it, and this makes all the difference.

Amen.