

Still Practicing Resurrection

A Sermon Preached by the
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Luke 24:13-35

In his compelling book entitled, “Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,” John Dominic Crossan asks this question: how many years was Easter Sunday? Good question, don’t you think as we move through the fifty days of Eastertide, the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost? And perhaps a good way to continue talking about the Gospel accounts of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples, which are always a challenge to our logical sensibilities. There’s that “now you see him, now you don’t” thing going on, with Jesus coming and going like the wind, which is always kind of unnerving. In today’s Gospel lesson, we hear the story of the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, who then go all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what they have experienced on that long, sad walk back to Emmaus.

They arrive, surely out of breath and bursting with the news of their conversation with Jesus, only to hear that Simon has already experienced the same thing. And the suddenly, without warning, Jesus is among them, inviting them to touch him; and, of all things, asking for something to eat. Now you see him, now you don’t. What do you remember? What do you remember that will get you through the next few days or months or years? What do you remember that will enable you to practice resurrection? How many years was Easter Sunday?

The Gospels, as we know, were written from memory – the memory of a community’s life-changing experience of this man Jesus of Nazareth. They are the narrative history of a community who remembered what it was like when he was alive, when he was preaching and teaching and healing and walking and eating with them. And they are the narrative history of this community, of you and me. They have become our memory of Jesus, a memory as clear and as real as the stories of our own families and the ways that we have been taught and healed and fed in that circle of love and trust.

Most of us have family stories or family members that take on legendary qualities over time. Ordinary people or events that somehow rise to the top of the story pile, folks known in the family for their eccentricities or their heroic deeds. Events that altered the course of a family’s history. They are the stories we remember, the ones that add color and texture to our own lives and help us sort out our own identity.

You would not have guessed, for example, if you had known my grandmother, that she was the stuff of which legends are made. You wouldn’t have guessed, because in the years I knew her, she was what we might call a

storybook grandmother. She stood just under five feet tall, and was nearly as round; she had wispy white hair that danced around her head like dandelions gone to seed. She wore what we called “Pilgrim shoes,” and black cotton print dresses and white aprons - all the time. She baked lemon meringue pies that were nothing short of a miracle and sewed Easter dresses that made us feel like princesses. If you can bring to mind Walt Disney’s fairy godmother in “Cinderella,” you have a pretty good idea of my grandmother, minus the wand and pointy hat, of course!

You would not imagine, looking at her, that family legend had her billed as the “first white child born in New Mexico territory.” And you certainly wouldn’t imagine her hiding in the root cellar with her brother and sister as their house was burned by the marauding vigilante “white caps.” You wouldn’t imagine that she remembered, as a very small girl, watching as Geronimo was brought through town in chains.

But those are the stories that I grew up on, that were told over and over again, often at our request. Grandma, tell us again how you were afraid to come out of the root cellar because you heard a strange noise, and how it turned out to be nothing more than an old cow scratching herself on the side of the house. Tell us again about the train wreck and the fire in the mines in Madrid. Tell us again about only being able to save the baby and the silver cream pitcher. Tell us again. . . and again. . . and again.

We all have them. The stories that are committed to memory, written on our hearts, told and re-told until we are no longer able to distinguish fact from fiction, or until perhaps we no longer care to. It probably wouldn’t be difficult to disprove at least one of the stories about my grandmother. But more than a half century, I have never wanted to, and have never even tried. It isn’t that the truth isn’t important to me, or that I just don’t want to be disappointed or disillusioned. It is rather that the truth of the stories is somehow less important than the truth they tell about me. Elders in the Native American community are known to begin family narratives with these words: “I don’t know if it happened exactly this way, but I do know that it’s true.”

Like all good family legends, these stories remind me of who I am. The stories of my grandmother remind me that somewhere I am brave and independent and strong. That I am somehow special. And because I have these stories, along with countless others, I don’t have to re-invent myself every morning. I have a firm and confident hold on my own reality. I know who I am.

Theologian Craig Dykstra talks about the role of memory this way: “Without a narrative that sustains us, the world – and we ourselves – are virtually phantom. But the issue is not just whether one has a narrative or not. The issue is whether we have one that is true and genuine, one that can sustain us in reality; one that, having been given and committed to memory, frees us from desperately having to make one up.”¹

¹ Craig Dykstra, quoted by Martin Marty, “Burning Hearts,” *The Christian Century*, April 10, 1996, p. 397.

The Emmaus Road story is in my narrative history – and in yours – the same way family legends are. We have told and re-told it until we have committed it to memory. In its familiarity, it sustains us in reality, just as the stories of our own families do. And like the travelers on the road to Emmaus, it frees us from having to make up life as we go along.

We don't know much about these travelers. We know that they were walking to a village called Emmaus, which according to most accounts was about seven miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. We know that it was the evening of the third day, that these two, one of whom was named by the Gospel writer, had left the remaining disciples and followers behind in Jerusalem, and that as they walked they were mysteriously joined by a stranger, who asked some interesting questions and provided even more interesting answers. We know a little about their emotional state, and can certainly imagine more. They were puzzled and disheartened and saddened by what had taken place in Jerusalem during Passover. They were undoubtedly feeling like they had lost their identity, that the chaos surrounding the crucifixion had left them without a clear sense of their future. They had forgotten the story.

We don't know much about Emmaus either. It was a little-noted town, and we don't have a clue about their reasons for traveling there. Perhaps they were going home, perhaps they were going there on business, perhaps they were going there just to get away from the terrible events of the past few days. The Presbyterian writer and theologian Frederick Buechner interprets Emmaus this way: "Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that (people) have had -- ideas about love and freedom and justice -- have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish (people) for selfish ends."

Emmaus is the place where we meet the risen Christ, the ordinary places and experiences of our lives, and the places we retreat when it all becomes too much for us, the places where we are called by name, where we re-claim our identity.

For the travelers on that dusty road from Jerusalem, Emmaus might have promised relief, or sanctuary; shelter from the confusion and grief, a chance to think about what had just happened. We know, of course, well in advance of their revelation, that Emmaus offered much more than that.

Middle Eastern hospitality would have dictated that the Emmaus travelers invite the stranger to join them for a meal. It would also have dictated that he initially decline by walking ahead of them as if he were going on. But they convinced him to stay, and while they were at the table, he "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them," and their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

Something happened in that moment that had to do with remembering. One writer puts it this way: "After floundering in chaos and wondering who their Savior really was, they retrieved their place in the narrative of life by remembering the words of life Jesus had revealed to them. Afternoon heartburn gave way to evening faith because they were able to take to heart the presence

of Jesus in their lives. The breaking of bread opened their eyes. The remembrance of Christ's words refocused their identity."

We all retrieve our place in the narrative of life by remembering. We gather at the table as a community of faith and we remember. We break the bread and pour the wine and say "Do this in remembrance of me." We travel the road to our own Emmaus and somewhere along that dusty road, we meet a stranger and we remember – difficult though it may be – to practice resurrection.

Frederick Buechner reminds his readers "that it is precisely at such times as these that life is going to ask us questions that we cannot escape for long: questions about where the road we are traveling is finally going to take us; about whether food is enough to keep us alive, truly alive; about who we are and who the stranger is behind us."

The questions don't seem to get any easier. And sometimes they are asked in the form of illness or loss, tragedy and fear. But we remember that we most often recognize the risen Christ in the brokenness, just as the Emmaus travelers recognized him in the breaking of the bread, in the brokenness of their lives that sorrowful Easter evening.

Brokenness is a condition of being human. We live with brokenness at every level of our lives, from our own private tragedy to global despair. But we also know that where we have been broken, we are stronger. Bones and spirits heal with a shatter-resistant force.

Storyteller Megan McKenna talks about telling the Emmaus story and the reaction of her listeners. She writes, ". . . in the telling the presence of Jesus becomes real. The community knows and comes together to share the hopes that are coming back to life." And then she goes on to say this about the Emmaus story: "This story absorbs other stories and casts them in other lights. God is near, as close as our hearts. God is hidden in words, lurking in every gathering of those who speak about the possibilities of hope, of life stronger than death and of the sheer power of love to transform suffering into forgiveness, reconciliation, and new forms of life. . . Then and ever since, the possibilities of what can come true, of how we can come true are limitless."²

John Dominic Crossan has said, "Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens." We might take issue with that statement if we didn't remember that the Emmaus story is part of our family legend, and like all family legends, the truth of it somehow matters less than the profound effect it has on our lives. At Emmaus, we try to make sense of tragedy. At Emmaus, we learn the stories that define and identify us. At Emmaus, we pick up the lost threads of our life's narrative and begin to re-weave them into a whole cloth. At Emmaus we start practicing resurrection. And Emmaus always happens. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Megan McKenna and Tony Cowen, *Keepers of the Story*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, pp. 98-99.