
REMEMBER AND REJOICE
LUKE 24:1–12
**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 17, 2022,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY**

There are so many things that can be said about the resurrection, but this morning, I won't aim to say everything that can be said about it because I want to be sure that I only preach one sermon and I'm certain that you'll be glad about that!

But I am glad that we remember the resurrection. Even for the so-called 'Chreasters,' that is, Christians who only attend church twice a year on Christmas and Easter (Chreaster), your presence is a testament to your memory. You have not forgotten what is of the utmost importance. You remember the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And as you know remembering is no guarantee. We don't remember everything or at least everything we should. Why is it that we remember things we shouldn't and forget things we should? We forget birthdays, wedding anniversaries, names, phone numbers, and most definitely, login passwords. And I am positive that you, blessed Carolina fans, the good people that you are, will never forget beating Duke twice in Coach K's final year as coach and you will never let us, Duke fans, forget it either.

Then there are memories in the corridors of our minds that we want to forget but can't, no matter how hard we try; we pass them up and down our mental hallway every day.

But I salute you for remembering the resurrection, which is why you're here.

Some things, we ought to remember. This academic year, we have intentionally remembered (We even have buttons with the word 'remember' on them to share with you). We remembered on behalf of the university the 20th anniversary of 9/11 this past September. We remembered and honored the life of J. Samuel Hammond, the university carillonneur emeritus, who played the carillon in the chapel tower for over 50 years and had his own delightful way of tipping his hat while calling me 'Mr. Dean.' As a university community, we also remembered the death of Duke alum and former trustee Dr. Paul Farmer, who was known for his extraordinary medical humanitarian work and co-founding of the organization, Partners in Health. And of course, we can't forget that it's been 3 years since our last in-person Easter service due to the COVID pandemic and many of us have remembered the millions of people who have died because of this virus. Even without a pandemic, there are those who were with us three years ago who are no longer here on earth, so we remember them too—our loved ones, our friends, our colleagues, our neighbors.

It's so important to walk up and down in the corridors of our mind and hold up a sign that says, 'Remember.' Not just the horrors or sorrows, but the joys—the good times, the family get-togethers, the beach trips, hiking in the mountains, pick-up basketball games, playing board games, taking silly selfies with your children, sitting on the porch with a sweet tea in conversation, holding your grandbaby in your arms while rocking them to sleep. 'Remember.'

This is appropriate because over and over again, throughout the Bible, we are told to remember. One key example of this is Israel's exodus out of Egypt and God calls them to "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm..." Or, at the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples, 'Do this in remembrance of me.'

The Bible, as a whole, in many ways, is a memory book. What has been passed down to us is from the past, historical documents, and so every time we read the scriptures or hear them read, or interpret them, we are remembering. Remembering the past. Remembering the future. Remembering what and who is important. Remembering how to live. Remembering God. Remembering Jesus. Remembering the crucifixion. Remembering the resurrection.

We are here today because we remember.

Even on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who came to the tomb, were told to do the same thing. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. *Remember* how he told you, 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.” Then they *remembered* his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.”

They came prepared with spices to rub over the body of Jesus to counteract the odor of decay because they did not remember, and when they didn’t find a body in the tomb, they were perplexed and terrified, because they forgot what Jesus told them; they forgot his promises. And so they needed others—those two men in dazzling clothes—to remind them, to call them to remember what he had said. It’s so critical to have others in your life—a community—to remind you of things you may forget.

Even preparing for these Holy Week services, since it’s been three years, some of us forgot how we used to do certain elements of each service (who goes where, do we process or not, who processes, do we include a greeting or not). So what did we do? We relied on each other to remember, because it’s natural, human, to forget, which is why we need a community of faith to help us remember what is most important. We need other people in our lives to help us remember rightly and redemptively, especially when we are in shock or grief.

The women at the tomb are disoriented initially, and their bad memory caused them to look for the living among the dead. Not remembering what they had been told by Jesus, caused them to look for life in the wrong place and not realize where Jesus was. Not remembering made them think he was dead forever and no longer relevant for their lives. They were confused and thought that only what was visible and tangible, was real, but they soon remembered that what was invisible, and intangible can also be just as real. An empty tomb with no body can do this.

Remembering reminded the women as well that life is found wherever Jesus is and that the resurrection is about life, not death, life beyond death and life after death. It’s about triumphs not terror, about rising, not dying. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?... Remember.”

If we don’t remember and lose our Christian memory, we may lose hope and despair and become perplexed and think that the Christian life is one dead end, like a tomb without life and only dead bodies.

This is not to say the resurrection means all of our problems disappear or there’s no more pain or struggles or questions, because even on the other side of Easter, there are still doubts and fears. Look at what happened to the women after they remembered. You might think that the women would have become famous TikTok stars overnight with millions of followers telling the good news of the resurrection of Jesus. But instead, when they went to the apostles, they thought their message was an ‘idle tale’ and they didn’t believe them. It was rough going for the women.

It’s a reminder that the resurrection doesn’t make life smooth, but it makes it true. It makes it real. It makes life matter. It gives life meaning and does mean that we can have life, an unimaginable life with God, a life that is stronger than death so death can’t control us, a life that means we can get up and make music in the world even amid unbelievable hardships like war.

The family home of Ukrainian professional pianist Irina Maniukina was wrecked by a Russian bomb that landed 30 feet from her home. To say farewell to her family home, she sat down at her grand piano to play one last song. Amid dust and ashes, in front of bombed out windows—you can see her in a video brushing the ashes off of her grand piano as she sits down and plays a piece by Frederic Chopin in a beautiful, courageous, determined, heart-wrenching manner. A song amid sadness, a sign of life amid death’s rubble. She revealed what Howard Thurman called the “growing edge” “the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and [humans] have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.”

Through life’s challenges, our Christian memory can be a source of hope. Mario was born with Downs Syndrome. As he got older, he became more aware of the difference with other children his age. He was in a 3rd grade Sunday School class with other 8-year-olds. He wasn’t readily accepted and was always on the fringe, but the teacher tried as best as he could to have the whole class love each other, learn and play together. For Easter, the teacher came up with the idea to get several large, plastic egg-shaped containers and give one to each child. The assignment was for each child

to go outside, find a symbol for new life, put it into the egg, and bring it back to the classroom to open it and share what they found.

As you might imagine, it was wild and glorious on a beautiful day as the children ran all over the church grounds to gather their symbols of new life. When they returned to the classroom, the children gathered around a table, put all the eggs on the table, and the teacher began to open them. He opened one and there was a flower and you heard ‘ooooo.’ He opened another and there was a little butterfly –‘ahhhhh.’ He opened another and there was a rock. And some in the class began to laugh—“a rock? That’s crazy!” And then the teacher opened one more egg and there was nothing inside. Some of the children said, “That’s not fair. That’s stupid! Somebody didn’t do it right.”

The teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down and it was Mario who said, “It’s mine.” And some of the other children said to him: “You don’t ever do things right, Mario. There’s nothing there!”

“I did so do it right!” he said. “I did do it right. The tomb is empty!” There was silence and like the silence of Holy Saturday between Good Friday and Easter, in that moment something shifted from Mario being once marginalized to being accepted by his classmates. Unfortunately, Mario had other health complications from early in his life so when he got an infection and his body couldn’t fight it off, he died.

At his memorial service, the other children from his Sunday school class marched up to the altar, not with flowers to cover over the stark reality of death, but along with their Sunday School teacher, marched right up to that altar, and placed a large, plastic empty egg.

Those children remembered what Mario showed them, which is more than empty eggs. He reminded them about empty tombs. And what’s more important than our memory is God’s. God’s mind is not empty but full of love for us because God remembers us! All throughout scripture, God remembers his covenant of mercy and love. Even when Jesus was dying on the cross, one criminal asks, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And that’s what Jesus does. That’s what God does for the dying or living—remembers us.

Our memory can be faulty, but God’s memory is faithful. The resurrection of Jesus is a sign that God remembers us even if we don’t remember. The resurrection is not dependent on our memory; it’s dependent on God, and this is our eternal hope— a God who remembers us no matter what. This is why we rejoice today—we remember that God remembers.

Go tell somebody like the women did. Christ is risen; he’s risen indeed! Alleluia!