

Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, PA
Festival of the Resurrection + April 17, 2022
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe: "Not Seeing is Believing"

I once knew a pastor who signed every communication with these words: "In the abiding hope of the empty tomb." I always found that disconcerting. If you want to be wordy with your valediction, why not say "In the glory of the Resurrection," or "Yours in the new life Christ brings?" Because to sign off with "In the abiding hope of the empty tomb" leaves us guessing.

Yes, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, but this is the Easter story we are talking about. If we are spending long moments at the empty tomb wondering and hoping, then we don't know how the story comes out. And we do know! We absolutely do! Because knowing the outcome is what makes us Christians. Paul sums this up in 1 Corinthians 15: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith!" And John Updike brings home the impact of his bodily resurrection ["Seven Stanzas at Easter"]:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

But let's give my former pastor colleague a break. Maybe he was stuck on today's Gospel. Because all we get here, on Easter Sunday in Year C, the Year of Luke, is the empty tomb. So what we are we, the people of the Resurrection, to make of these 12 verses?

[Clip of Elvis song: "Oh seeing, seeing, seeing is believing, And I see him everywhere...."]

Seeing is believing? Contrary to Elvis, what the women at the tomb tell us loud and clear is that NOT seeing is believing. At first they have no idea what to make of things. The stone has been rolled away and Jesus' body is missing. They are perplexed, a wonderful word that arcs back to the beginning of Luke's gospel when the young Mary was perplexed by the angel's sudden appearance. Here at the tomb, more angels appear and remind the women what Jesus had said. This reminder provides the breakthrough that releases understanding.

But wait a minute. How could the women, who hung on Jesus' every word, have forgotten what he told them? That the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again? Wouldn't you think those words would have been seared into their consciousness?

Quite possibly NOT, based on what we are now learning about the brain and how forgetting works. We know a lot about how memories are formed, but scientists are discovering that forgetting seems to be an active mechanism that is constantly at work in the brain. In some animals, possibly all, they say the brain's standard state is not to remember, but to forget. In fact some even claim the brain is *built to forget*, and that to have proper memory function, you must have forgetting. Why? Because forgetting allows the creature to cope with an environment that

is constantly changing. To survive, animals must adapt to new situations. Allowing fresh information to overwrite the old helps them to achieve that.

Back to the tomb and the women's forgetting. We must take into account what they had just been through--the trauma of watching the crucifixion of the one they loved. To adjust to the reality of Jesus' very visible death, the memory of what he had told them about how he would rise again could well have been overwritten by the reality of his death. Not overwritten and lost forever, but overwritten temporarily, pushed out of the conscious mind down into some holding tank in the hippocampus so that they could accept that that Jesus was really, truly dead.

All it took to bring this memory shooting back to the surface was the angels' reminder of what Jesus had said. At that instant they were flooded with understanding. Because remembering is not only calling to mind something gone from consciousness, it reinforces what had been heard but not fully comprehended.

The women's response proves they are true disciples. In Matthew's gospel the angel commands the women to go and tell the others; not here in Luke. The women know without being told what they need to do, and off they go to spread the news, fleet of foot and full of heart in knowing that their Lord is in fact alive. And they didn't just go, tell, and be done with it. The Greek verb informs us that they *kept on saying it*. We don't have the actual text of their message, but almost certainly it was not "The tomb is empty, the tomb is empty," but "Our Lord has risen just as he said! Our Lord has risen just as he said!"

These five-plus women were truly the rock stars of the Resurrection. They saw no evidence of Jesus being alive, but they didn't need to see in order to believe. They simply remembered what Jesus had told them and, because they trusted that he was indeed the Son of God and therefore ultimately trustworthy, that was enough.

Not so, sorry to say, for the other disciples. They rudely dismissed the women's account as patently unbelievable--which also tells us that THEY did not remember, either, what Jesus had told them. Maybe because the women kept saying it, Peter was finally compelled to go and check it out. He saw exactly what they did. And what did he do in response? He went home.

What we learn from this is that sacred act of faith begins in trust. The women knew Jesus had risen because he told them he would, and they trusted that what he said was true. We do too. Trust takes practice, though, and it's a good thing to be practicing your faith in the Resurrection because there will be a time in your life, if there hasn't been already, when you will need to fall back on this, as author Timothy Keller did in an interview published two days ago. The author of a long list of very readable books on Jesus and faith, Keller is dying from pancreatic cancer. Here is what he said: "I think that the great thing about cancer is that Easter does mean a whole lot more because I look at Easter and I say, 'Because of this, I can face anything.'"

As we live into the promise of Easter, practicing our trust, let us embrace faith not as a hope but as lived experience that reveals far greater truths than the eye could ever behold. Amen!