

## **After Easter: What do we do with the memories?**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, April 11, 2010.

*Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31*

By this time, we've eaten the ears off the chocolate bunny. We've had plenty of hard-boiled eggs, egg salad sandwiches, deviled egg, and then roast lamb, curried lamb, lamb sandwiches, lamb soup, and lamb with hard-boiled eggs. Our Easter flowers are in the ground. Now what? What do we do with the memory? Not the memory of Easter the holiday, but of Easter the resurrection experience, Easter the day when Christ was raised from the dead. What do we do with that memory?

Only a few days have passed since the tomb was visited and found empty, except for a couple of sleeping guards and a couple of dazzling angels. Most people in the area have not heard anything, only that this man Jesus was crucified and now dead and buried. Jerusalem is still volatile, as it always is at a major Jewish holiday like the Passover observed during Roman occupation. Jesus' disciples have heard and seen Jesus, in separate little incidents here and there—Mary and a couple of the disciples, then a few more, and then all except Thomas, and then poor Thomas.

But who can blame him? It is still a confusing and frightening time, these early days. Nothing—not even Jesus' prophetic words about his dying and rising again after three days, which they never really understood—nothing had prepared them to encounter a real, living Jesus brought from the dead. Nothing could even tell them what this means. They still have questions that they can't even articulate, so abruptly has their world been overturned. God is God, a human is a human, right? Dead is dead, alive is alive. So what happened, and why did it happen? Who is Jesus? If we believe all that has happened, how do we live differently now? What do we do with our memories?

Memories are powerful because we can fill them with such different meaning. We can make a memory healing, or destructive. Memories can help us move toward hope, or toward despair; toward reconciliation with a loved one, or toward separation. Think of how you can choose to frame your experience of the day you took your first driving test, for example. When you backed up into the “no parking” sign, was it funny, or embarrassing? Think of the chaos of your wedding day, or the way that the birth of your first child turned your world upside down—or how you interpret the life of someone who just died—or most of all, how you interpret the life of someone who just died, and then is alive again. How the disciples first saw Jesus after his resurrection, and what meaning they gave to it, may have been one of the hardest tests of their discipleship. Are they faithful to Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God? Or are they fly-by-night religion salesmen whose miracle ointment will wear off as soon as the last disciple has died? The answer to whether we are true disciples will depend on how closely we conform our lives and our stories and our memories with the way that Jesus lived and taught.

We see the beginning of the evolution of Christian belief here. The early days are like a seed, newly planted. The early disciples did not begin with a theology. They began with an event—the resurrection of Jesus, seeing him alive after having seeing him dead. At this point, they probably have many more questions than they have answers. What sits between that event then and our theology now, are the disciples and their stories. They begin to put it all together, to understand what the last three years—and especially the last few days—were about. Their experience becomes memories, their memories become stories to tell and retell, and gradually their stories take on a meaning in community with others and their stories. And so we begin to form a theology about Jesus, or as we call it, a Christology.

The disciples didn't start out with a perfect understanding. When they meet in that upper room, they lock the doors “for fear of the Jews.” Later Peter accuses the Jews of killing Jesus by hanging him on a tree. And even later, John the Evangelist writes that those who pierced Jesus will wail when they see him (not rejoice at being forgiven or saved). So the early disciples had to grapple not only with the nature of their joy, but also with the temptation to blame, and sometimes the early Church moved more towards blame than toward reconciliation and peace. The “new covenant of reconciliation” established by the Paschal mystery, as today's Collect put it, did not pop up fully formed right away like the goddess Athena out of the head of Zeus. In fact, reconciliation seems to have been a sticky point, despite Jesus' reassuring words “Peace be with you.” Thus, we have Yom HaSho'ah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Jews, and hopefully the rest of the world, preserve this awful memory to remind us never to tolerate again that monstrous atrocity. Holocaust Remembrance Day—we see the seeds of its necessity in all three of today's readings: “for fear of the Jews;” “you had Jesus killed,” the nations will wail on Jesus' account.

Our own Christian life and our own discipleship is like the making of memories and stories. Every day is an opportunity for a story of transformation or of stagnation. Every day gives us the possibility to blame or to thank, to divide or to reconcile, to wish our opponents shame or peace. As we move toward a new chapter in this church, Christ Church Cathedral, will we see hope and resurrection, or blame and death? What will be our stories? What will be our memories? Will we remember the times we flourished and can celebrate, or the times we faltered and cast blame? And then, as we look to the future, as the disciples eventually had to do, what will we do with our stories? In other words, do we work for peace, or just believe in peace? Do we practice forgiveness, or just believe in forgiveness? Will we practice reconciliation, or just talk about it? Do we live discipleship, or just believe in discipleship?

I read in the latest Newsweek that “memory museums” are in. A shining example is the Underground Railroad Freedom Center here in Cincinnati, but you may also remember the Holocaust Museum, the Apartheid Museum in South Africa. More recently, the Museum of Memory and Human Rights just opened in Santiago, Chile. And there are plans for other such museums in Guatemala, Peru, Argentina, and Mexico. The idea is to keep in live memory the victims of oppressive and deadly regimes. The concern, however, is that these new ones will become politicized—used to demonize

rather than to forgive, to institutionalize animosity rather than to promote reconciliation among the people. They would become political footballs if the “memories” are tied not to hope and healing and resurrection, but only to blame, discrediting, and destruction.

So it is important to keep in mind the resurrection in all that we do, and in the making of our own memories and stories. The resurrection gives us new life and new hope as we live each day as new disciples. As Bishop Breidenthal told us in his Easter sermon, Jesus’ resurrection is God’s “Yes” to our fondness for saying “No.” Remember God’s “Yes” and make it our “Yes” as well. Resurrection affirms Jesus’ “Yes” to heal, to bring God’s kingdom to this earth and this community. Resurrection is the ultimate victory of love over hate, welcome over rejection, forgiveness over vengeance, Jesus’ peace over our fear. May our Easter be celebrated not as memory museums but as holy stories that all say “Peace be with you.”