

Sermon
April 12, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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The Power of Memories
Luke 24:1-12

A week ago our family received word that a dear friend had died in the midst of this pandemic. He was the father in a family that my daughter Zeta Elizabeth had babysat for through high school, college, and graduate school. They were a second family for her and had stayed close friends through the years. He was only 61 with no known underlying conditions. As my daughter tried to come to grips with this news she began to remember special times with that family. One thing led to another. She found herself in the midst of the shelter in place orders prohibiting her from going to be with the family doing the only thing she could - she went through old photographs. In the process of looking for pictures of times with this family she also found other pictures that took her on a journey back through high school and college remembering people and events that had shaped her life.

In today's world many families find themselves doing just this when a death occurs for we go to pictures to remind us of the life we shared with a loved one. Pictures and videos have become a powerful tool in our grief.

For the early disciples there were no pictures or videos but the memories were just as powerful. At the end of the day after witnessing Jesus' death on the cross the disciples including the women returned to where they were staying filled with grief. It was the Sabbath and so they rested. If you have ever experienced the loss of a loved one you know what that first day is like - trying to wrap your head around the reality of what has happened. And remembering.

Early on that first Easter morning the women went to the tomb to prepare the body. But what they discovered was not what they expected. The stone had been rolled away from the tomb and the tomb was empty! Jesus' body was not there! Two men in dazzling clothes appeared and said "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.” The women remembered and went to tell the others what they had discovered only to not be believed.

Our experience this Easter is eerily similar to that first Easter morning. For we are gathered in our homes locked away from others. Some are afraid of what is happening around us. Unsure what the future holds. The tomb was empty and our Sanctuaries are empty this day. There are no new Easter outfits, no pictures taken with families in front of flowered crosses, no gatherings of extended families for a big meal and fellowship. No large gatherings in places of worship to sing praises to God. But friends, nothing can stop us from remembering. And there is power in memories - a power that can change the world.

The women remembered what Jesus had said and no doubt they shared their memories with the disciples. But the disciples initial reaction was not to believe them. Something in what they said caused Peter to get up and go to see for himself. Peter was *“amazed at what had happened.”* This week I found myself wondering what memories were going through Peter’s mind early that first Easter morning. As he searched his memories as we search through pictures what would he have found to prod his memories?

I remembered Jesus had told the disciples three times that he would suffer, be killed and rise on the third day. So I looked back through Luke’s gospel to see what Peter might have remembered about those incidents. And my friends, those memories revealed some interesting things. For right before each of those predictions Peter had a powerful encounter with Jesus - something he would no doubt have remembered that day.

Two of the predictions are recorded in Luke 9. The first one came right after Jesus asked the

disciples “*Who do the crowds say that I am?*” The disciples answered “*John the Baptist; but others Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.*” And then Jesus had asked “*Who do you say that I am?*” It had been Peter who had answered him “*The Messiah of God.*” (Luke 9:18-20)

In response to Peter’s words Jesus had commanded them not to tell anyone that fact and then said “*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.*” Peter no doubt remembered that moment. Maybe he remembered thinking at the time if that is what will happen I am surely not telling anyone that Jesus is the Messiah! Peter may have remembered Jesus went on to say “*if you want to become my followers you must take up a cross daily and follow me.*” Oh my, we didn’t understand what that meant at the time but now... was Jesus telling us we were called to follow him even if it meant death on a cross?

As Peter continued to sort through his memories he no doubt remembered the powerful experience he, John and James had when they went up to the mountain to pray with Jesus. We remember it today as the Transfiguration. They had seen Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus whose clothes had turned dazzling white. The women said there were two men at the tomb who had spoken to them and they appeared in dazzling clothes....hummm, interesting. Peter no doubt remembered that he had offered to make dwellings for all three of them and at that moment been engulfed by a cloud. He had heard a voice say clearly “*This is my son, my beloved; listen to him.*” (Luke 9:28-36) Peter no doubt remembered being stunned into silence. Who would believe what he had experienced? But it had been right after that Jesus had again said that the son of Man would be betrayed into human hands. (Luke 9:43-45) Oh, they had not understood what he meant! And they had not even asked him what he meant. But he had been betrayed and by one of them!

After that Jesus had taught them so much that they had been grateful just to soak up what he

shared. They had listened to him. And yet there had been another time Peter remembered - a third memory. Not very long ago, just before they had entered Jerusalem. Jesus had been asked “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” And then told a story about how hard it would be to enter the kingdom of God. Peter remembered the question that followed “*Then who can be saved?*” Jesus had said “*What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.*” Peter had not understood what Jesus meant. After all they had left their homes and given up everything for him so he had asked Jesus about that. Jesus had assured them they would receive something in this age and in the age to come for their sacrifices.

And yet right after that Jesus had taken the inner circle of disciples apart and told them he was going to Jerusalem. He said again he would be handed over to the Gentiles, mocked and insulted and spat upon, and flogged. (Luke 18:31-34) I saw those very things happen to him! Jesus had also said he would be killed and on the third day rise again. Could it be true? Had Jesus risen from the grave as he said he would?

Scripture says Peter was amazed when he saw the empty tomb. Yet because we know the rest of the story we can imagine that as Peter remembered things Jesus had said he came to believe. For it was through Peter’s powerful words on the day of Pentecost that the church was founded. Friends, there is power in memories and that power motivates us to tell our stories - our memories - to others.

In years to come we will always remember Easter 2020 as the year that sanctuaries were empty because of a deadly virus. But friends, this virus does not stop us from remembering and telling others our story any more than the fears that the first disciples had stopped them. For today we remember again that what is impossible for mortals is possible for God. For Jesus Christ has risen from the grave and lives among us. Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah who came to save us. And through his resurrection from the grave we are promised eternal life with God. The women told the disciples. The

disciples and especially Peter told others what they remembered. Will we remember and tell others?

As my daughter Zeta Elizabeth remembered her friend and through her journey down memory lane remembered so much more she expressed gratitude through a Facebook post with pictures for all those who had molded and shaped her on the journey of faith. This Easter I pray that we too will remember and express our gratitude to God and to one another for all those who have told the Easter story year after year so that all the world might know that Jesus Christ has risen from the grave.

Jesus is not here. Jesus is not confined to the tomb or the walls of the church. Jesus Christ is in the world sharing grace and love to the world through you and me. And that my friends is our calling. Jesus Christ has risen from the grave and lives through those who believe. May we be the church in the world proclaiming the Good News that Jesus Christ has risen. He is Risen! Say it with me... He is Risen! Say it so your neighbors hear you - He is Risen! Thanks be to God!