4-20/21-19 Remember and Believe Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 24:1-12 Easter

How good is your memory? Can you remember to pack everything for a trip without checking off a list? Can you remember names of co-workers, church members and neighbors? Can you remember birthdates without being reminded?

There are times when our memories work well, and times when our memories fail us.

In my family I am teased for remembering events from 20 years ago yet cannot remember what I need to do this week if I don’t write it down. My dad was well known in my family for forgetting birthdays, whereas my aunts are well known for sending cards.

I may forget what I preached last week, yet I can still remember the words to a song I sang in junior high in Japan.

Most of us cannot remember what we did on Thursday, but we will never forget when we first heard of the events of 9/11.

Why is it we remember some things and forget others? Could it be that we remember those occasions, events and words that have left the greatest impact on our lives?

One of my favorite times at funerals is when people began to remember and share their stories of the deceased. Sometimes this is among family members reminiscing about the good old days. Sometimes this is among family members as they sort through pictures or choose songs that best reflect their loved one’s life and faith. Sometimes memories are shared in the midst of a funeral service, and sometimes memories are shared around the table at the funeral meal. Some memories aren’t appropriate for the funeral, yet are shared at later times. Often the memories shared in times of grief are memories of those events, sayings, songs and everyday living that made the person who they were and made our relationships with them what they were.

When I was preparing to share my Dad’s eulogy at his funeral service, I naturally asked my family members for their favorite memories of Dad. I heard stories of teaching and band camp, stories of his days with the fire department, and stories of family vacations and daily life. I will never again hear John Phillip Sousa’s *Stars and Stripes Forever*, without hearing it as the recessional for Dad’s funeral.

Songs, events and words that have had the greatest impact on our lives will be our greatest memories.

Today, as we lift up Alleluias to celebrate Easter, we gather to remember and re-tell the greatest memory of our faith story, a story that continues to impact, shape and define who we are as children of God, followers of Jesus, and men and women of faith.

Today we gather to remember and re-tell the Easter story, a story of a cross—and an empty tomb, a story of death—and resurrection, a story of despair—and hope.

Before we get to the joy of the empty tomb, the story of Easter begins in the agony of the cross.

On the cross Jesus died. Death had won.

Imagine the grief and despair of the disciples on that Sabbath Saturday. They were in disbelief that Jesus was dead. They were in shock at the quickness of the events of the past few days, from the Passover to the Garden to the trial to the cross. They were in despair that they had betrayed Jesus in his hour of need.

As the disciples struggled to process all they had seen and experienced that week, I can imagine them sharing their memories of Jesus. “Hey, James, remember the look on your father’s face when you said you were leaving to follow Jesus?” “Remember how shocked your family was, Peter, when Jesus healed your mother-in-law?” “Think of all of the healing we have seen, men healed of leprosy, women healed of demons, Lazarus even raised to life after death!” “Hey, Peter, remember that day on the lake, when Jesus stilled the storm, and when you tried to walk on water and nearly drowned?” “Then there was that day on the hillside, when a few loaves and a couple of fish fed such a crowd! Over 5000 came to listen to Jesus that day. They fed on his every word. When did the tide turn? Why did they have to crucify him?”

Memories were shared on that Sabbath Saturday by grief-stricken disciples. Memories of healings and miracles. Memories of struggle with the religious leaders. Memories of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God.

Yet not one of Jesus’ closest disciples seemed to remember that Jesus not only predicted his death, he also predicted his resurrection. Three times Jesus said he would be killed, and three times he also said that in three days he would rise again. But these words they did not remember.

So on that first Easter morning, resurrection was the furthest thought from anyone’s mind, as the men still hid in fear of the Jews and the women quietly moved to the tomb to properly anoint Jesus’ body.

These faithful women had been at the cross when Jesus took his final breath. They watched as he was buried in a borrowed tomb. Due to the Sabbath there had been no time before burial for the women to anoint Jesus’ body with spices, to perform one last act of love, so in the early morning of that new day the women hurried to the tomb before the day got too warm and the body decomposed any further.

The Gospel of Luke names the women as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women who traveled with Jesus. These were the women who financially supported Jesus’ ministry. These were the women who cared for Jesus and his disciples.

These were the women who journeyed with Jesus, who listened to his teaching, who watched as he healed, who experienced his transforming ministry of grace.

On that early Sunday morning, these were the women who headed to the tomb, to practically grieve for the one they also called Teacher and Lord. Imagine their surprise to find the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. Then they found the tomb—empty! The body—gone!

Luke says the women were perplexed, the reality of an empty tomb not what they expected. I am guessing perplexed is an understatement! Why is the stone rolled away? Where is the body of Jesus? This was not part of the normal ritual of death.

Their perplexity quickly turned to terror when two angels suddenly stood before them, and compelled them to remember.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, the Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again. He is not here. He has risen!”

Three times Jesus had predicted his suffering, death and resurrection. Three times those closest to Jesus did not understand his words. According to the angel’s call to remember, at some point even these women had heard Jesus’ prediction.

So on that first Easter morning, in the presence of an empty tomb and angelic visitors, the women were told to remember. And when the remembered, they believed. And when they believed, they rejoiced. And when they rejoiced, they hurried to tell the men what they had seen and heard and experienced.

The tomb was empty! Death had been defeated! Jesus was alive!

The disciples, however, were not as quick to join the women in their rejoicing. Overwhelmed by their own sense of grief and loss, the disciples could not remember Jesus’ own words of new life. So because they could not remember, these men struggled to believe the story of the women. They called the women’s words an idle tale, nonsense, make believe. They thought the women were delirious in their grief. They thought their story too good to be true, or in the lexicon of our day, they thought the women’s words were fake news.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt someone was not telling you the whole story?

Have you ever doubted the words of someone else because their tale seemed too good to be true?

In 1985 my mother and I were struggling to finance our trip to Japan with PROMISES, a musical missionary group. Even with help from my grandparents, there just wasn’t a lot of extra money in our household.

Then one day, Mom received a phone call that left her stunned, speechless and overwhelmed with tears of disbelief and joy. The phone call seemed too good to be true, hard to believe, but the message was true. Through the generosity of over 20 friends in our tour group, my trip to Japan had been paid in full. Mom now only had to finance her own way. I can still remember watching Mom take that phone call, standing at the kitchen counter, staring at the phone in disbelief, wonder and joy.

In 1971, during the Vietnam War, a shell came in and exploded a young man’s body. The only thing left were his dog tags. Those dog tags, those nametags, were sent back home to his mom and dad, where they held a service to grieve for their son, their only child who had been killed.

Since this was their only child, they struggled to come to terms with his death, especially since there was no body.

Shortly thereafter the war ended, and the soldiers and POWs started to come home. One day, the telephone rang; the mother picked it up, and the voice on the other end said: “Mother, it’s your son.”

Her heart stopped. She was breathless. She was astonished and amazed. “Is this some kind of cruel joke?” she asked. “Is this some kind of a hoax?”

“No. This is your son. I have been a prisoner of war, and have just been released. I am calling to tell you that I am alive.”

--Edward Markquart, sermonsfromseattle.com, adapted

The story we proclaim this morning is not fake news. The story we proclaim this morning is God’s good news, that we are called to remember and to believe. Jesus is alive! The tomb is empty! Christ has risen, just as he said! This good news is why we gather today to celebrate Easter.

Yet--how many men and women today still hear the good news of Easter as an idle tale? How many today scoff at the notion that God loves them unconditionally? How many today are skeptical of faith? How many today cannot trust something that cannot be scientifically verified?

Peter ran to tomb, found it empty, and returned to the other disciples amazed. Yet for the Gospel of Luke, amazement does not mean faith. Nowadays many men and women are amazed at the stories of Jesus. They see him as a great prophet, a philosophical leader, a learned leader.

Yet that does not mean they believe in Jesus.

Jesus’ closest disciples, because of their grief and fear and uncertainty, could not believe the tale of the women until the reality of the living and breathing risen Lord was standing face to face in front of them. Only by experiencing the risen Lord could the disciples believe in the truth of the resurrection. We will hear that story of an Easter evening encounter next weekend.

The women believed the words of the angels; the men had to experience the risen Lord in order to believe. Yet it was this combination of story and experience, of empty tomb and risen Christ, that transformed the lives of these early disciples in such a way that this group of fishermen and women became the passionate speakers and leaders of the early Christian church.

Faith in a crucified and resurrected Lord and Savior came gradually rather than suddenly for even those closest to Jesus. How many of our faith journeys have been a gradual journey of faith rather than an instantaneous belief? We are in good company with the disciples. Yet, when the disciples remembered and finally believed, resurrection faith changed everything.

Resurrection faith changed their outlook on life, on death, on fear, on faith. Resurrection faith caused the disciples to review all that Jesus had said and did in a new light. And in that new light, they remembered, and they believed. They recognized the depth of God’s grace. They recognized the power of God. And they recognized the in-breaking of God’s kingdom in their midst. Resurrection faith compelled the disciples to then become bold in sharing their good news. Jesus who was dead, is now alive! God’s power is greater than death! Through faith in Christ, they now had hope for tomorrow!

We are called today, like the women and the disciples long ago, to live by such resurrection faith. We are called today to remember all that Jesus said and did, all who Jesus was and is, and believe in God’s resurrection power still in our lives today. Yet be warned- resurrection faith will change our lives. Resurrection faith will call us to live by faith and hope, by love and forgiveness, by grace and joy.

Are we ready to remember and believe?

When we remember the story of Jesus, we remember God’s sacrifice of love for us. When we remember God’s sacrifice of love for us, we remember that God is with us. When we remember that God is with us, we remember there is nothing in this world to fear, including death. When we remember there is nothing including death to fear, we remember the story of Jesus.

In March 1994, the children’s choir at Goshen UMC in Piedmont, Alabama, was singing for the Palm Sunday service. As they sang, a massive tornado hit the church, killing nineteen people and injuring eighty-six others. Among the dead was Pastor Kelly Clem’s four-year-old daughter, Hannah.

The day after the tornado, a reporter asked Reverend Clem if the disaster had shattered her faith. She replied: “It has not shattered my faith. I’m holding on to my faith. It’s holding me. All of the people of Goshen are holding on to one another, along with the hope that they will be able to rebuild.” Then Kelly said to the reporter, “Easter is coming.”

Over the next few days, Kelly performed one funeral after another, including one for her daughter. Toward the end of that awful week, Kelly began receiving phone calls from members of the congregation. Given the death of the pastor’s daughter and the destruction of their sanctuary, they asked, “Reverend Clem, are we having Easter this year?” Her response was, “Yes.”

At the Easter sunrise service, two hundred people gathered in the front yard of the destroyed facilities at Goshen UMC. With a bandage on her head, her shoulder in a brace, and her heart breaking with grief, Rev. Kelly made her way to the makeshift pulpit. She opened her Bible, looked into the faces of her traumatized congregation, and then read these words from Romans 8, “Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

--Excerpted from MinistryMatters.com, Martin Thielen, adapted

The empty tomb may at first seem like an idle tale, but what it says about God is a story of love and power and hope. We are called to remember and believe that God’s love is shown in Jesus’ teachings about how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. God’s power is shown in Jesus’ crucifixion, a sacrifice of love to wipe clean the record of our sins. God’s hope is shown in the resurrection when God promises us defeat over death through the promise of everlasting life for all who have faith.

The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is a story of God’s forgiveness of our sins and

God’s triumph over death. It is a life-transforming tale if we allow Christ to enter our hearts.

It is a life-transforming tale if we live like we believe love, not hate, has the final say.

Consider these words by Karen Pidcock-Lester:

“There is a power stronger than whatever binds you to death. That power is the love of Almighty God, and it was unleashed upon this life at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is love which is Lord of heaven and earth—not sin, nor greed, nor brutality, nor hatred, nor even death—and strong though these demons may be, their doom is sure. It is the love of God which will triumph in the end.”

-The Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual, P.101

Today we are called to remember and re-tell the Easter story, a story of a cross—and an empty tomb, a story of death—and resurrection, a story of despair—and hope.

Today we are called to remember, and to believe. Death is defeated. There is hope beyond the darkness of this world. Nothing will separate us from God’s great love for us.

Today, may we go forth remembering Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, and believing that Jesus is still our crucified and risen Savior and Lord.

Christ is risen! Alleluia! Thanks be to God.