

Sermon – Great Vigil of Easter – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

Luke 24: 1-12

Tonight, we stand on the cusp of a new day, a day of hope and joy, a day of clarity and faith. Over the past 6 weeks we have been living through the season of Lent. It has been a time of reflection of our own mortality and our relationship with God, through the life and death of Jesus Christ. The world today is in many ways completely different to the world Jesus knew but in some ways not that different at all.

Human nature has hardly changed at all. Many people in the world still put themselves first rather than putting their neighbor first. God for many is a mythical or absent figure, completely irrelevant to their lives so they feel. For Christians, we continually reflect on our human nature and seek a life that models itself on the life of Jesus and his teachings, loving our neighbor as ourselves and caring for this broken world.

Yesterday was a solemn day of remembrance of the time Jesus was arrested, crucified and died upon that old wooden cross. He was sentenced as a scapegoat, a sacrificial lamb if you will. The high priest Caiaphas had nurtured the desire that one man, Jesus, should die to suppress the new movement of love and save the population. He thought, like many today, that eliminating an immediate threat would return the community to a relatively safe status quo. How wrong Caiaphas was? Good Friday is a day filled with painful memories but a necessary day. Without Good Friday, there would be no Easter Day.

The darkness and solemnity of Good Friday gives way this night to the joy and brightness of Easter, the resurrection of our Lord. Jesus rose to defeat death as Peter says, “because it was impossible for him to be held in its power”.¹ The joy that we feel tonight and the joy we will experience in the coming days and weeks as we celebrate this annual feast of Easter should be infectious within our families and communities. But like much of life this joy is not shared by all.

For many people live their lives perpetually in a Good Friday sadness. As preacher William Sloan Coffin declared “we live in a Good Friday world.” There are many that suffer the indignity of poverty, illness, or incarceration. Others suffer the pain of grief, mental illness, addiction and violence. When we look around at our world it really does resemble a “Good Friday world.” No one really wants to stay in this world as the power of pain and suffering wears on the mind, body and soul.

The suffering and pain that surrounded Jesus in the last few days of his life was so great it drove away his disciples and those that had been closest to him during his ministry. Despite Jesus repeatedly telling his disciples that he would need to die but he would rise again they were still unable to comprehend that their beloved teacher was to face death.

It is not uncommon for us to react the same way and to recall only the bitterness and agony of painful periods of our life and blank out all that might be hopeful. The mind is a powerful

¹ Acts 2:24

component of our human selves and memories can be locked away inside of it for great lengths of time. Eventually we need to process the pain and grief of past events to move into a more hopeful future life.

One of the fascinating things about the brain is its ability to store memories that we can recall at later dates to help us better understand some part of our lives. Trauma often results in suppressed memories. It can take a great deal of personal work to overcome the mind's response to trauma and unlock memories. To lose our memory is to diminish our humanity.

Neuroscientists have discovered that when some recall an old memory, a representation of the whole event is instantly reactivated in the brain that often includes people, location, smells, music and other trivia. Memories often play out in our minds eye like a movie. The hippocampus binds together the diverse elements of an event to a single, holistic memory.

We all have experienced significant moments in our lives that remain crystal clear and can be recalled in seconds. Many of you could tell me clearly what you were doing at 8.45am on September 11, 2001. Likewise, if you are old enough you might recall where you were when you heard the news that President Kennedy had been assassinated, or what you were doing when you heard that a young gunman had murdered young children and teachers at the Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Maybe it was a great sporting event that triggered an immediate recall. If you are a golf fan maybe it was when Tiger Woods first won a Master's title in 1997, or a Met's fan when the amazing 1986 team won the World Series, and on and on. We also have significant events in our personal lives that we can recall at a moment's notice. The birth of a baby, the death of a parent, major life milestones and so on. Each of these memories are stored in our brain for later recall.

Imagine then if you will being a disciple of Jesus as he walked the hill country of Judea, the shores of Galilee or the urban centers of Jerusalem or Capernaum. The chosen twelve were closer to Jesus than almost anyone else and were witnesses to the significant events in his life - the feeding of the five thousand from five barley loaves and two fish, or Jesus walking on water, or the blind receiving their sight. Each event would have made a significant memory for the disciples, especially for Simon Peter.

Simon Peter could be regarded as first among equals. He was the first to declare that Jesus was in fact the messiah of God. He was one of three that witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus and walked on water one night until his fear overcame him. He resisted Jesus attempt to prepare the disciples for his death but Jesus dismissed him by calling him Satan. It must have stung Peter and left an indelible memory. Finally, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny even knowing him, much to the dismay of Peter. But as we know fear again overtook him and under personal pressure he denied knowing the very friend and teacher that had completely reshaped his life.

We might closely identify with Peter if we are to be honest about our own lives. He tried to be good and to provide for his friend. He tried to protect Jesus knowing he was the messiah. In the end though fear and doubt overcame him. He must have been perplexed as he tried to reconcile

all that he knew about his experience over the past three years and his knowledge that Jesus was the messiah of God, with the fact that Jesus had been crucified and had died.

Aren't we like this? We try to be strong and to protect our friends, and in the case of our faith to give true witness of how Jesus has worked in our lives. We also can succumb to fear and doubt, and with the pressure and perplexity of the world bearing on us, we can deny the very thing we know to be true and right.

The mood in Peter's house must have been somber on that Sabbath Day as he sat with the other disciples after the death and burial of Jesus. In any house of mourning there are those that become immobilized by the weight of grief and those that busy themselves with the necessary tasks of the day to keep themselves occupied. The women were up early the next day and went to the tomb with purpose. It was the women who experienced the open tomb and the two angels who reminded them that they had already been told that this would happen.

Then they remembered. The whole movie of Jesus' life with them probably sped before their minds eye. Of course, it all made sense now! When the women went back to the house and spoke to the disciples of their experience and witness they were not believed. However, Peter was woken from his somber mood, possibly by the instant recall of his own memories of Jesus' prediction. He had to experience it for himself and leapt up and ran straight for the tomb only to find it was empty as the women had said. He knew instantly that the prophecy of Jesus had been fulfilled. And he went home amazed we are told.

I hope you too go home tonight amazed by the experience of what took place early that morning. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and his defeat of death drawing on the witness testimony of Peter, John and the other disciples. We can identify with their experience because we too have had the same experiences recalling things from our past that inform and make sense of the present.

The truth that Peter witnessed, that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead, has withstood the test of time and the many attempts to discredit it. Truth stands firm and has a way of always coming to the surface, no matter how much people may try to bury it or distort it or outright deny it. There were many conspiracy theorists in Jesus day just as there are now but the truth that Jesus the Christ overcame death is a sustained truth that we can fully believe in.

It is this amazing truth that gives us new life and helps us move from living in a Good Friday world, to living in an Easter World.

Amen