

Memory and Mystery

Luke 24: 1-12

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Easter Sunday

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I've never seen the inside of Notre Dame Cathedral in person...I was lucky enough to travel to Paris in 1992 and saw many of the other famous sites of that city, but Notre Dame was closed that week for some kind of repair or renovation. Even though we couldn't go inside, you could see it from several of the cafes where we ate along the River Seine. It's a visual reference point in the city. I couldn't possibly count how many of my friends have visited Paris and snapped a photograph in front of that famous rose window.

It felt like the world was collectively mourning on Monday afternoon as we watched the cathedral burn in real time. Thankfully, much of the building was spared, and the French government has committed to rebuild the cathedral, but the original parts of that building were over 800 years old. That cannot be replaced. That building has stood through the Protestant Reformation, the colonization of this country, the French Revolution, two World Wars, and countless other significant moments in time. And yet major parts of it were gone within a few minutes once the fire started burning out of control. For awhile, before the fire brigade was able to get close enough to fight the flames effectively, it looked as if the whole building might go down. It made us realize how ephemeral everything is, even an edifice that has been part of the French landscape for centuries. It can all vanish in a matter of minutes.

There is much for which we can be grateful. One firefighter was injured, but no lives were lost in the fire. As I said, much of the building survived and people from all over the world are committing funds to help pay for the restoration. While I sat and watched the news coverage

as the cathedral was burning, I was moved by the crowds of people gathered in the streets of Paris, singing hymns in French. It was such a powerful moment of unity... not only for Catholics, not only for the French, but for human beings. Humanity still responds to beauty. We still seek something that transcends our individual selves and unites us with one another.

One of the CNN commentators spoke about the architecture of cathedrals, and specifically that of Notre Dame – how the height of them is supposed to draw our eyes toward heaven and their sheer size is intended to invoke awe and wonder. I also see these ancient buildings as repositories of our collective memory as a people. They hold so much of our history, and at their best they lead us toward what could be. They remind us of the mystery of who God is and what God is doing in our world.

Much was made about the tragedy of Notre Dame occurring during Holy Week, and how people who normally worship there on Easter would feel lost today. Of course that is at least partly true...but it's also possible that there are aspects of the Notre Dame fire that can reinforce the hope of Easter for us.

I was struck by the photograph of the inside of Notre Dame that the *Washington Post* ran on Tuesday morning, the day after the fire. I thought it was so touching that I asked to have it on the cover of this morning's bulletin. Take a moment to look at it...really SEE it. It is a scene of destruction, of devastation, and yet the cross – the EMPTY CROSS – shines through. That image is powerful enough to sustain us through whatever suffering we have endured or will endure in our lives. For me, this year, the picture of the light shining on the cross and reflecting back to us, from the ruins of a burned cathedral, is what Easter is all about. In the face of the worst life can throw at us – disease, poverty, loss, fire – the cross is present, and Jesus has risen.

It is hard to believe, but that is enough. Today is a day of memory – we celebrate the truth that the tomb was empty when Jesus’ friends went to find him there. It is also a day of mystery...we still don’t know what happened on that morning, how this all came about, and (at least in this life) we never will. There is a lot about this whole narrative that doesn’t make rational sense, but part of a life of faith is embracing the mystery and living the truth of the resurrection.

Perhaps some of you saw the *New York Times* article on Good Friday, by opinion writer Peter Wehner. He discusses the cross in a way that makes a lot of sense to me. In all honesty traditional theories of Christian atonement have never appealed to me. They go something like this. “Humans are wretches, broken by their own sin. Someone had to pay for all of the bad things that we do, just by existing as our own fallen selves, but there was no one whose death would be significant enough to be an adequate recompense for all our sins. So God had to do it himself. It’s so wonderful that God did that for us?” Well...okay. I get that even this theological framework was intended to communicate God’s mercy and God’s grace, but...really? The whole mathematical idea turns me off and strikes me as a product of our zero sum mindset. And, does a God of love and grace really keep score in this way, demanding punishment that is equal to *all the crimes*? That doesn’t sound very gracious to me. The whole point of grace is that it is undeserved, so the transactional model really, to me, is not adequate.

What has always resonated with me is the idea that God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ because we needed a human being to whom we could relate. God was willing to take on and even embrace the vulnerability of being human so that we could get to know God more intimately. And, by becoming a mortal being, Jesus entered into our suffering – not so much dying FOR US (although he did that too) as dying WITH US. Peter Wehner, in his *New York*

*Times* piece, expressed it this way: “In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? From the perspective of Christianity, one can question why God allows suffering, but one cannot say God doesn’t understand it. God is not remote, indifferent, untouched, or unscarred.”

Peter Wehner goes on to relay conversation he has had with Rev. Scott Dudley, Pastor of Bellevue Presbyterian Church in Bellevue, Washington. Dudley points out that on the cross God was reconciling the world to herself – but God was also, perhaps, reconciling himself to the world. The cross is not only God’s way of saying we are not alone in our suffering, but also that God has entered into our suffering through her own suffering. Scott Dudley acknowledges that there really has never been a sufficient answer developed to the question of “Why is there suffering?” but he says ‘What God offers instead is the promise to be with us in our suffering, and bring good out of it (life out of death, forgiveness out of sin), and that one day God will put a stop to it and redeem it. God, the book of Revelation tells us, will ‘make all things new.’ For now, though, we are part of a drama unfolding in a broken world, one in which God chose to become a protagonist.”

I don’t think Peter Wehner has settled the questions of the mystery of the cross and what it means for the way we choose to live life in its aftermath...but I do think he has given us a way to contemplate that mystery that doesn’t make God a smug collection agent and us debtors that can never catch up to all we owe.

Here are two things that memory tells us in the face of all the mystery. One: the cross is empty. Two: so is the tomb. We can never fully grasp what led to these truths, but what we do with them is up to us. If the cross is to continue to shine in the rubble of loss and sorrow, we

must make it so. And how do we do that? In the same way Jesus lived in this world – we do not cover up our vulnerability, we believe in the possibility of redemption (even for the ones we do not think deserve it), and we enter into people's suffering with them. It's hard. It's messy. It can be bitter. And still the light of mercy and life shines through. He is Risen! He is Risen indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.