

April 12, 2020, Easter Sunday

Psalm 118 (selected verses)

Luke 24:1–12

Testimony

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Where does Easter come from?

It seems an odd question, maybe. But I think it's a fair one. Easter is one of the slipperiest pieces of our religious life. The actual word "Easter" is never mentioned in the pages of the Bible – and nobody quite knows where the word even comes from; it might be derived from the name of a north European pagan goddess of spring¹¹ which, if that's true, makes things both more interesting and more complicated. Easter dances all over the calendar, balanced somewhere between the spring equinox and the full moon; it floats on tides of time and light. St. Augustine tells us that in the year 387, for instance, Easter came on three different dates around the Mediterranean basin. Even now, if you ask the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, they'll tell you that we're a week early – and we'll tell them next Sunday, as they celebrate, that we've been there already.

In a way, though, this slipperiness makes sense - because if you read the gospels looking for it, you'll find that the first Easter came for different people at widely different times. It met the three broken-hearted women at the tomb in the half-light somewhere between the end of one day and the beginning of the next. According to the Gospel of John's version of things, Easter found Mary Magdalene somewhat later, in the garden as she stood weeping by herself, and only when she heard a familiar voice speak her name. It came belatedly for some of the men in Jesus's inner circle – and only when they were willing to get up and go see for themselves. It happened for others at an inn in the village of Emmaus by the last light of that full day – and then a week or so later for Thomas when he finally had his doubts expunged – and then *much* later for Paul on his way to Damascus. Easter takes its own time. Easter makes time its own.

But to the odd question, where does Easter come from? I want to try out an odd answer: it comes from behind us.

The three women who made their way to the tomb that morning were already running a little behind. Since Jesus had been killed on a Friday, and his body hastily deposited in a borrowed tomb by the last light of that day, respect for the religious practice of keeping Sabbath beginning at sundown had delayed their errand of tenderness for a day. So they set out early, as soon as the Sabbath was past, to perform the somber work that needed to be done inside the tomb. The text actually says it was something like "deep dawn" that they made

¹ The Venerable Bede, in his 8th century work [The Reckoning of Time](#), says that the month of April had been known in time past as *Eosturmonab* because it was the season when pagan Anglo-Saxons held festivals in honor of a north German figure named Eostre – but that these had been replaced by celebrations of Easter by his time.

their way through in that little crack of time between Saturday and Sunday – no doubt with their minds full of the hard and very real things they knew they would see and touch and smell that would fill the morning ahead of them. The twin shocks of finding the heavy stone that sealed the tomb already rolled aside and, then, the body not in the place on the floor inside where they'd left it, were disorienting enough; and then, the sudden arrival of two dazzling strangers out of nowhere must have planted in their souls the defining question of every Easter: *what is going on here?*

But the dazzling figures speak words that point in an unexpected direction. “Remember how he said to you, while he was still in Galilee, that this is just how it would be?” Remember what he told you about the way his message would be received: the danger, the certainty of arrest, even execution, the sense of catastrophe – and remember how he said that it would not end there, not end at all actually, but burst out in a way that even the combined authority of the empire and the Sanhedrin would not be able to bury? *Then they remembered*, says the text. And that's where Easter comes from: it comes from behind us, when we remember what we've heard, what we knew but had forgotten, and finally recognize it for the truth it was, though we could hardly have seen or grasped or understood it at the time. Then they remembered what he'd said, what he'd promised, what he'd done – and that's when they began to see how the pieces of the present fit together, began to be able to start imagining what the future might look like. That's when they knew they were at the beginning – not at the end.

What they saw at the tomb made no sense until they stirred it with remembrance. Until they looked behind them, it just looked like death, followed by theft, maybe, or just by meaningless, inscrutable emptiness. Until you remember, and as long as you're only looking straight ahead of you at the signs of death that are everywhere, it all sounds like “an idle tale” – as Luke tells us it did sound to the men to whom the women brought their astonished testimony.

Let's take a closer look at those men. They fled from the place of execution – and probably we can't blame them, given the danger they must have felt once the rulers started condemning people to die just because the crowd encouraged them to go ahead. The text doesn't tell us this, but maybe we can assume that they were heartbroken – and maybe we can look at them generously, pinned as they were in an unthinkable present the death of their friend and hero, bereft of a future in a now-collapsed movement for which they'd left everything. Who could blame them for feeling stuck in a question that felt impossible and huge and horrible: what do we do now? And that's when the women arrive breathless with their counter-intuitive message: *Remember!* That's what we do now! *Remember what he said? Remember how he told us that it would be bad, that it would seem over but that it would not be over?* But how do you get your eyes to see the living when all you think you can see is the dead? You can't recognize unless you remember.

Luke, who's telling this story, does a remarkable thing at precisely this moment: just as the women are speaking to the death-fixated men, Luke gives them names: “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.” It was from their memory that the church salvaged the hindsight it needed to understand what had happened. It was from the testimony of very particular people, the kinds of people whom history has had a terrible tendency to forget – and let's not miss the thundering echo of how this bit of history repeats itself every time men choose not to credit the report of what women have seen and know is true. It was the testimony of the women that salvaged the meaning of that morning: *we saw it. We went to the place of death, and he is not there. We remember, and we're telling you: it's not over. It's just beginning.* There is no recognition without remembering. And remembering is always done in the memories of very particular people. The oxygen it breathes is the stories of witnesses, people who always have names (even if we've forgotten them): Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and that other Mary, you know, the one who was the mother of James – particular people who say, *I remember, and now I see it for what it is. And if you remember, you'll see it too. You'll see through all the signs and statistics of death everywhere, see right through to the life that you remember. The life that continues.*

Christians do a lot of talking about life after death. On Easter the message is that death does not have the final say – that the life in Jesus was stronger than all the death that the empire and the powers could scrape together, and that the bottom line on the meaning of that day of days is that there is hope after all, that death is not the last thing, that love prevails, that justice is possible, that faith is rewarded.

But we live in a world where there's death all around us – and none of that confident talk makes complete sense until you remember what he said, back there in Galilee, back there at the beginning of Lent, back there at the beginning of your Christian journey: *Blessed are you who are the poor in spirit, he said. Blessed and beloved of God are you: the ones who grieve, the ones who show mercy even when you have every reason to feel only bitterness. Blessed are you who have been hungry, for food and for right relationship. Beloved of God are those among you who have given your heart and soul to making peace. You shall be alive with God, and God shall be alive with you; you will obtain the same mercy that you have wielded in this world, and you shall be known as God's own children.* Remember how he said to you, while he was still in Galilee, that you were beloved of God? Even you who have a hard time believing this could be true when you see all the death everywhere – *even you* have been found, *even you* are inscribed in the heart of God, and even whatever combination of belief and unbelief you have will be enough to get you up off your mat and get you walking back into the world. And remembering will fill you with the life of Jesus because Jesus's life doesn't stay entombed. Jesus's life isn't sealed underground. Jesus's life is walking around looking like justice, talking like love, smelling like hope, feeling like welcome, and tasting like bread and wine.

And while you're remembering, remember one other thing too. Remember that the truth that makes all the pieces of Jesus's life fit together – even when it looks like there's only death everywhere you look – the truest truth of Jesus's life will only get slippery, the way it loves to do, and start moving around in time the way we so need it to do if there's someone to tell the story. Easter rides on the testimony of the ones who remember, the ones who are brave enough and full enough of love and light to tell what they remember. Oh, we still have our tender and somber errands to attend to, in this hard time. But into the midst of them, Easter has come riding in again on the tide of light and time – riding on the testimony of Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, who remembered, and then saw that his love wasn't gone just because they had ruined his body; he wasn't finished breathing just because his mortal lungs had finished their usefulness. Without their testimony – well, where would we be? But, thanks be to God, we are here!

And why are we here? We are here because there will come a time, *there will*, when someone is going to need you to remember what he said while he was in Galilee – you know, *blessed are you, beloved are you, you are found, take up your mat and walk* – and then, on that day, Easter will ride in again, on the testimony of Peggy, and Ernie, and Holly and Aiden and Chloe, and Daniel, and Ligia, and Eldon and Katie, and Sebastian, and Theodore – and Jack, and Evan, and Kristin, and Khayla, and Annie, and Brian, and Chris – because without you, without what you remember – *beloved are you, blessed are you* – without you, well, where would we be??

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