

Start the gospel here. Luke Chapter 24 v.1. Put out of your mind the birth story of Jesus, with Mary's Magnificat, the shepherds, and the miraculous speech of Zechariah and Simeon. Forget Jesus' baptism and the voice from the clouds declaring him the beloved son. Leave behind the healings, the parables, the encounters with Pharisees, and even the predictions of his suffering and death. Put away Palm Sunday. Just for a moment, put aside his arrest, trial, sufferings and death on a cross. Clear your mind of what you know about this story, this man. And start the Gospel of Luke right here.

It's dark, early dawn, and they came to the tomb. This beginning brings questions to mind.

The Tomb - someone has died, but who?

Who is "They?" Why did 'they' go to the tomb, and why so early?

They have the spices, Ok. But this is unusual:

These spices are used to prepare* the dead for burial.

The timing of all this feels disjointed.

When 'they' get there, they find the stone rolled away from the tomb:
Peculiar, though also convenient.

But the body is nowhere to be found.

Where is the body? And whose body is it?!

Suddenly two men appear in dazzling clothes - who are they?

And finally our first answer - 'they' (these people) are women.

These men terrify them, but they shed some light (not only for the women but for us, the reader). **"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."**

These women aren't looking for the living - they're looking for the dead, among the dead. But this question rattles them. They don't understand, so the dazzling strangers make it clear - "He is not here, but has risen." Met with disbelief, confusion and perhaps even more terror, the men go on to remind them: "Remember" they say. Remember.

This one little word, throws us back on the first 23 chapters of Luke. Remember they say. Remember his birth, remember Mary's song, remember the miraculous speech of Zechariah and Simeon. Remember his baptism by John, his miraculous healings, his disputes with the Pharisees, his amazing stories that revealed God in ways we'd never known before. Remember his message that he preached in the synagogues:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

"Remember," these strangers tell the women. "Remember how he told you... that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then, "Then they remembered his words." And thus remembering, they returned from the tomb and told all this to the eleven and to all the rest."

What difference does remembering make? Notice that these men in dazzling clothes don't tell the women to "Believe" - "believe he is risen from the dead." Remembering requires something more of us - it asks us to reflect back and sift through what we thought we knew. It sends us back to reabsorb our experience, reinterpret what we saw and learned and felt. Remembering is an act of re-seeing, especially for these women, now faced with this announcement: They are told by these men to re-see their memories of Jesus in the light of what they're being told - that he is risen from the dead.

So these women (including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the mother of James and others), they remembered Jesus' "words," but I believe they remembered more.

- They remembered Jesus healing that one leper who told him "Lord if you choose, you can make me clean; and stretching out his hand, touching him, Jesus said, "I do choose."
- They remembered him telling that paralyzed man lowered through the roof by his friends that his sins were forgiven - and the man stood up, took his mat and went home
- They remembered eating with him among tax collectors and other sinners.

Declaring the poor blessed, breaking the sabbath to help people, and even raising the dead: It all came back, and it all suddenly made sense - that **everywhere Jesus went in life, he was defying death**, declaring life and raising people to new life through acceptance and love. Jesus was dismantling and destroying the power of death one suffering person at a time. And having received suffering and death himself, God raised him from it, destroying finally the last enemy - death itself.

My question to you though, is what difference does remembering make for you? What story or stories are you thrown back upon? Because the news that Jesus is dead no longer, but risen, changes everything we thought we knew - it recasts our experience of the world, of our relationships, of suffering, even our understanding and beliefs about God. Faced with this news, what do you need to remember?

I remember the white walls of Stratford Baptist Church in Stratford, CT. I remember sitting shoulder to shoulder with my grandmother as little boy in those pews, and years later singing in that same room for her funeral.

I remember Pastor Lindsay's bright smile, preaching in German to a sparsely populated sanctuary of elderly German Lutherans. I remember watching my sister get married in that church and singing in the choir with Mom and Dad. Mary Peltzer's cookies, and Hertha's warmth. And Lindsay's funeral this week, surrounded by a church community that raised me in the faith.

In the face of all the lives we've lived and known, all the deaths we've endured and mourned, I am told that he is dead no longer, but risen. And suddenly the context for all these lives, these relationships, these deaths changes. All the ways we are quietly shaped by people (with faith in these few words and the God who finally and ultimately defeated death forever) gets recast in the resurrection.

But what shape does that cast take?

It's in the face of that empty tomb, that these women return to the others. They go back and relay the message. But explaining all this, "these words seemed to [the other disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Except for Peter.

Remember him? We heard from him last on Good Friday, when Jesus was on trial: Standing around a fire outside with some folks that began to recognize him as one of Jesus' disciples. Peter denied knowing him for fear of being killed himself.

Peter, still in the grip of Jesus' death, hears the words of the women, and runs to the tomb." And like the women, seeing it empty, he remembers - he turns over in his mind the experience of being witness to Jesus' life - then returns home, amazed. Peter remembers.

Our reading from Acts is a speech by Peter to Gentiles in Caesarea. He says, "We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and Jerusalem." They killed him; but three days later God raised him. To this we are witnesses, and to this we testify.

Like these women, Peter has become a witness. In the face of that empty tomb, Peter remembers it all but in a different light - the light of the resurrection - and that remembering changes him and the course his life will take. That course will take him to his death. But to that death, he goes now unafraid.

It's important to remember that this story is not a story about encountering the risen Christ. Jesus isn't present in the story beyond what's said about him: His name isn't mentioned even once. The importance of belief comes later, next week in fact. But I think it's important how Luke "begins" here, and I think it's important to *believing*. To hear that news that Jesus is risen, to remember in its light is to become a witness. All this comes before *believing*. It is in the presence of the risen Savior in the stories that follow this one, that birth belief. That living presence is precisely that to which we witness, to which we testify.

This Easter Day is about nothing other than this remembering, than this re-seeing of the stories of our lives in the context of Jesus - his death, his life, and the God revealed by him. The revelation he brings changes the story and that story, my friends, needs telling. Will you return from the empty tomb, and tell the rest? Will you return amazed at what's happened and testify to this new beginning? May it be so.

AMEN