

Do You Remember?

April 17, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Luke 24: 1-11

First, how 'bout a shout out to the choir for that glorious anthem and to Kate for the last line? "Threads of glory," indeed! Will you pray with, please? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God our rock and redeemer. Amen.

So, I begin today with a reference to another joy filled anthem by the great 70's soul-funk band Earth Wind & Fire. [start music on iPhone as background]

For many of us, the mere mention of their name has the power to evoke their infectious grooves and soul-soaring harmonies, whether for vocals or horns. After all, *do you remember?* [hold music right to the mic]

"Do you remember the 21st night of September? Love was changin' the minds of pretenders, while chasin' the clouds away." [turn down music]

It's another ode to joy, an entire dance party in a song, and then that awesome chorus kicks in: [hold music to mic again]

Hey, hey, hey, ba dee ya, say that you remember, ba dee ya!

And with that, Happy Easter, everyone!

Now, if by chance you've ever wondered what that irresistibly danceable 'do-you-remember' line means, well, you've come to the right church today! Turns out a struggling L.A. songwriter named Alee Willis wrote the lyrics to go along with that musical track and the "ba-dee-ya" expression that the band had already laid down. In an NPR interview a few years back, Willis confessed to stumbling at first: "What the _____ does 'ba-dee-ya' even mean?" she asked the band. When she realized they had no intention of parting with the hook, she learned her greatest lesson in song-writing, from the lead singer Maurice White, who told her: "never let the lyric get in the way of the groove." Willis then shared more of her process. They had already given her the title, *September*. But why the 21st? She said people constantly ask her that. But they just went through all the dates: "Do you remember the first, the second, the third, the fourth ...? ' and the one that just felt the best was the 21st." There's no greater significance, she apologized. except of course, that it's all about the groove, right? Finally, in that same piece, an NYU music theory professor mused about the song's incredible staying power. He said, "The song's very structure is an endless cycle that keeps us dancing and wanting more. There's four chords in the chorus that just keep moving forward and never seem to land."

Strange how something so forward-moving begins by looking back!

What does all this have to do with Easter? Well, did you notice what the mysterious men in dazzling clothes ask the stunned women in the empty tomb? First, it's "why do you look for the living among the dead?" But then it's 'Do you remember?' Do you 'remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that he must be handed over, that he must be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' And then, as one translation puts it, "then the women did remember." As I imagine it from that pause, from that reminder to trust in what he and God's love said and did, the present moment shifted. From that new place, they could sense - they could hear, feel, see, taste, and smell - a new post-resurrection reality emerging as if in faith they'd known it was possible all along. Something new kicks in, a new energy emerges, a new possibility and forward movement!

Meanwhile, the men (sorry guys) they still don't have a clue! They're mere pretenders, still waiting for that love to change their minds because they don't stop to remember. In other gospel accounts, they're running around in fear, stuck in the trauma and shame of the last few days, and honestly, who can blame them. Here, Peter runs to the tomb. He's right there looking at Jesus's grave clothes, yet it seems he loses the deeper thread because he doesn't remember first. It comes later to the others, on the road to Emmaus, when what Christ said to them "burns" in their hearts, as the story goes. But here, Easter dawns first for the women who remember. The irony is intense and painful. The first-named Easter witnesses – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were with them, the first to proclaim the good news, and yet the men are the supposed "apostles"? If only the early church remembered. It's right there! If only they had paused their urgent grasping for power and patriarchy! Mmm-mmm!

Ok. Time for a little Greek. The Greek for "resurrection" is *anastasis*, as it says on our banner here. The Greek word for remember is *mimnesko*. And as one scholar suggests: "it means more than just mere recollection; it means something more like "to bring past actions to bear on the present, with new power and insight."It's a tangible, consequential kind of recalling, a form of remembering that is at the same time a form of action — and for the women at the tomb, it carries the force of an epiphany and a commission: "Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest."¹

Like hearing that Earth Wind and Fire song, first, you remember, and then, as if on command, your body and booty are moving to the dance floor, except here, it's not just another invite on a wedding night! It's an invitation to remember Jesus, his persecution, suffering, and death, and by extension, his life and teaching, and deeper still, the power of God's ever-coursing love. It gives the grief-stricken women a thread to hold onto, something to ground them amid their fear and grief.

Last Sunday, we shared with many of you these simple hemp bracelets. At the end of service, we gathered in a circle to sing *Blest Be the Tie that Binds*. We paused for a moment and heard these lines from William Stafford:

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change....
While you hold it, you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.*

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/4/16/dawn-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-sunday>

*Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

Amen? So often, when we think of Easter, we go straight to the hope and joy, right! Yet, before that, Easter is a call to remember, to find and hold onto that thread of God's love. For the women, the "curtain of the temple had been torn in two" as scripture says, on Good Friday. They showed up on Easter morning, their hearts in tatters, yet when they remembered what he told them and witnessed that empty tomb, they knew they could never again lose the thread! Easter begins here. First, remember the pain he experienced, which at some level says, 'it's ok to bring yours too,' even today! Bring your tears, bring your open wounds even. 'It's ok. I've got them too!' the Risen Christ says to doubting Thomas. Pain is real, and resurrection won't take it away! Yet on that first Easter, they shift from the rituals of mourning and anointing. In their memory and witness, they come to see more than their pain, more than a wrenching end. They come to believe that the worst thing is never the last thing. They grab hold of and set themselves amidst a continuum that stretches beyond those "narrow parentheses of our birth and death." It is a continuous bond and thread of God's abiding love. What at first appeared as an end becomes a powerful new beginning, a new life, a new community of love in action, all based on the memory of him!

Remembering, of course, is a deeply biblical practice. Our spiritual ancestors and we have been instructed for millennia to remember the covenant, to remember Jesus whenever we sit at the welcome table! The women had been told to do it all their lives -the Hebrew word for remember, *zakhar*, is one of the most used in all of scripture. This is not nostalgia, mind you, nor some mere recounting of events. This is a deeper memory that grounds, clarifies, motivates and provokes us into actions of radical love, liberation and joy! It means we can remember the grief Covid has wrought, *and yet* be motivated to strengthen and celebrate our ties to one another, especially today when it's been so long so that we've been together! It means we can bear witness to war in Ukraine yet hold onto those "the mystic chord of memory" about which Lincoln wrote, that may *yet* swell the chorus of our better angels. It means we can and must face unflinchingly the horrors of chattel slavery, of genocide and the reality of ongoing state-sponsored crucifixions and police executions, *and yet* remember too the resistance and the emergence of a truth that will set us all free to create lasting cultures of genuine inclusion and radical joy.

If you'll allow me to switch gears a bit, I have another, different and more science minded poem related to our theme, by Marie Howe called *Singularity*. This was a gift of the Spirit this week that came into my inbox. I wasn't even looking for it. It was written in the days following Stephen Hawking's death and it conjures Hawking's theorems about the origin of the universe. You might want to close your eyes for this one:

*Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity
we once were?
so compact nobody
needed a bed, or food or money —
nobody hiding in the school bathroom
or home alone
pulling open the drawer
where the pills are kept.
For every atom belonging to me as good
Belongs to you. Remember?*

*There was no Nature. No
 them. No tests
 to determine if the elephant
 grieves her calf or if
 the coral reef feels pain. Trashed
 oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;
 would that we could wake up to what we were
 — when we were ocean and before that
 to when sky was earth, and animal was energy, and rock was
 liquid and stars were space...
 before we came to believe humans were so important
 before this awful loneliness.
 Can molecules recall it?
 what once was? before anything happened?
 No I, no We, no one. No was
 No verb no noun
 only a tiny tiny dot brimming with
 is is is is is
 All everything home*

Can we remember like this, what once was and is and always be! If you ask me, the question is embedded in the very fabric of our Easter story if not of existence itself. Easter, that so-called “octave of creation” echoes the power of God’s love that creates new life at the very beginning of time. Easter, that cosmic Big Bang like force that reminds us in human scale and story of the universe changing power of God’s love! Forget about recalling and yearning for life before or after Covid. Like Howe’s poem, Easter invites us to remember before and beyond time when life was one and new, and to do so especially in this Good Friday world when it seems like things can’t get worse. For that’s when the poets and angels and dancefloor d.j.s proclaim and exhort: Remember! Wake up! Arise! With the chanticleers and cockerels, wake up, be part of manifesting a world that is drenched in the singularity of God’s loving purpose, a world wider than our narrow-minded polarizing blame, shame and violence, a love stronger than empire and death , a way of living that is constantly beckoning us to freedom and joy, a way of being that brims with gifts of presence, belonging and home! Easter is a memory and a celebration that God’s love is and is and is, and that there is nothing more powerful!

In this way, like the song we opened with, our story’s structure is also like endless cycle that keeps us moving and wanting more. At once forward looking, yet strangely looking back, grounding in what we already know. This is molecular-level faith and it has the power to unleash an atomic joy! It’s “deep in this unfolding story,” to quote Kate Layzer’s gorgeous hymn that we are about to sing. Thank God for such endless strains, for threads of glory, for every anthem of endless joy. Friends, do you remember? *Ba dee ya!* Please say that you remember! *Ba dee ya!* Say that you remember! Say Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.