

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z21
Easter Day (Year C) 8:30 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 21 April 2019

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
Luke 24:1-12

To an Unseeable Animal

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Lk. 24).¹

My friend Rick Fabian defines nostalgia as, "longing for a past that is not yours."² He probably did not have this consciously in mind but it made me think of the slogan "Make America Great Again." Nostalgia can be a powerful force, a way to use the past for our own purposes in the present.³

Johannes Hofer invented the word nostalgia in 1669. The Greek word nostos means to return home. Algos means pain. Nostalgia is the pain of returning home in our imagination. The word nostos also refers to a whole genre of Greek epic literature about heroes returning home by sea. Like Homer's Odyssey it is not enough to return to a place, the challenge is to do this with one's identity intact. When it comes to Easter how do we move beyond the longing for a past that is not our own?

On March 29, 1832 the twenty-eight year old Ralph Waldo Emerson visited the tomb of his wife Ellen. Before her death over a year earlier the couple had been deeply and joyfully in love. They traveled and wrote poetry together. They dreamed of the future until tuberculosis killed her two years after their wedding.⁴

Without her, Emerson's life completely unraveled. His career was falling apart and he felt preoccupied with death. On that day in March he did something extraordinary. He opened his wife's coffin. No one knows what he saw there. Emerson craved direct personal experience. He needed to see death for himself.

Perhaps his deeply religious aunt Mary Moody Emerson inspired him. In a letter she once wrote, "Did I not assure good Lincoln Riley... that I should be willing to have [my] limbs rot... if I could perceive more of God?"⁵

On this Feast of the Resurrection, when we desire to perceive more of God, I have three short chapters on memory, body and mystery.

1. Memory. The women who go to anoint Jesus' body with oils and spices are in such a different frame of mind than Emerson was. The shock of the escalating events must have hit them hard: from the cheering crowds as Jesus entered Jerusalem to his arrest, trial,

torture and death. At dawn in what the Greek calls the depth of the early morning they find the tomb door open and the body gone.

Suddenly two men in dazzling, shimmering, shining, flashing (astraptō) clothes appear. The women recoil in fear. The men ask, "why do you look for the living among the dead" (Lk. 24)? Then they say, "remember how he told you" that "the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, crucified and on the third day rise again?" The next line is what strikes me so deeply. "Then they remembered his words." Easter is about a kind of remembering.

But how could they have forgotten in the first place? Jesus told his friends that terrible things were going to happen to him. I guess it was so much easier to not take that in, to get wrapped up in routines and habits, to think about other subjects, to argue about who is greater, or to dismiss what he said in one way or another. We do this too. We know things subconsciously that our rational self cannot face.

What might not be obvious when we read this story in English is how often the word memory occurs here. The Greek word for tomb is mnēma. That's more like our English word "memorial" and that is what a grave is for isn't it? To remember. The Greek word mimnēskomai means something less passive than our English word to remember. It is more like, "to bring past actions to bear on the present with new power and insight."⁶

This kind of remembering means more than just passively thinking thoughts, it is to change our actions in the present. Easter brings us into the presence of God by showing us that we are God's children, that nothing we have done or that happens to us can separate us from the love of Christ.

2. Body. Bodies matter so much to Jesus and to his followers. In the last half-century bodies of people in industrialized societies have changed substantially. This fall the Stanford neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky spoke here at Grace Cathedral. He talked about how our bodies are flooded with levels and kinds of pleasure that humans in previous generations could never have imagined. In a Cathedral organ concert he noticed that in earlier generations this music would have been the loudest human made sound the people ever heard.

Today the food we eat, the drugs we use, the music we listen to, the images we see, the smell of soaps, etc. are all engineered to light up our brains. Drugs mean that we can experience dopamine levels a thousand times higher than any other human before. People these days have a hard time just walking safely around the city because their brains are constantly being stimulated through their earphones.

Sapolsky points out that these, "over-the-top non-natural sources of reward" inevitably leads to habitation and a sense of "pervasive emptiness." He says, "Our frequent human tragedy is the more we consume, the hungrier we get."⁷

In this hungry time we need bodily wisdom. When I say that I believe in the resurrection of the body I am saying two things simultaneously. First, that no matter how desperate things seem to be I trust God. Nothing truly good will be lost forever. I am also saying that despite evidence to the contrary I believe that the world God made, the world we experience as bodies, is good. Bodies matter to God.

Although today bodies and our anxieties about them are manipulated to sell products, to demean and to devalue, we can choose to treat bodies with reverence. This effort explains so much of what happens in this Cathedral. Together we kneel, stand, sit and through singing even breathe together. We are reminded that Jesus says, "this is my body" about the meal we share. In baptism our bodies are washed. At the peace we touch each other in love and hope. Together we are called the body of Christ. Through Christ God participates in the world. One day we believe our bodies will be gathered together in God.⁸

3. Mystery. After their encounter at the tomb the women rush off to tell Jesus' other friends. "And they did not believe them" (Lk. 24). Not believing amidst the chaos of ordinary life is normal. Belief is something that is different than knowledge. We all have moments of stronger and weaker faith. I love this story of Peter running to the grave. What did he think about as he went? He too sees the burial linens. The body is gone. He returns, "amazed at what had happened."

Nothing about this seemed obvious or clear to the people who were there or to us. Most of God will always be mysterious. At the heart of our life is mystery. We just don't often enough appreciate it.

On Monday night in the darkness of dusk I was walking by Signal Hill in the Presidio. On the west side of the path the Eucalyptus Trees were shaking in the onshore wind. On the left side of the path are the ancient and dying Cypress Trees making a kind of extraordinary natural cathedral nave.

Fifteen yards away a coyote stopped in the middle of the path to look at me and then sauntered along a side trail. I felt such an intense thrill of joy. This is how I felt last time I was surfing and a curious seal popped its head out of the water to inspect me. What are these beings thinking? The mystery is all around us and God is in it.

Wendell Berry wrote a poem called "To the Unseeable Animal."

"Being, whose flesh dissolves / at our glance, knower /of the secret sums and measures,
/ you are always here, / dwelling in the oldest sycamores, / visiting the faithful springs /
when they are dark and the foxes / have crept up to their edges. / I have come upon
pools / in streams, places overgrown / with the wood's shadow, / where I knew you had
rested, / watching the little fish / hang still in the flow; / as I approached they seemed /
particles of your clear mind /disappearing among the rocks. / I have walked deep in the
woods in the early morning, sure / that while I slept / your gaze passed over me."

"That we do not know you / is your perfection / and our hope. The darkness / keeps us
near to you."⁹

Why do we look for the living among the dead? Especially when there is so much life all
around us? I think it is because we long for a deeper perception of God and do not
know where to begin.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had to see for himself. We don't know what he experienced that
day at his wife's grave but we do know that it broke his self-destructive preoccupation
with death. Within a year he was on a ship to meet his intellectual heroes in Europe and
a reputation as an incurable optimist.

What hope is there for us on this treadmill of saturated sensation and the pervasive
emptiness of habituation? We are not doomed to feel nostalgia for someone else's past.
Through Jesus we can return home to God.

This Easter is our own when we remember it through action as children of God. Easter is
our own when we treat our bodies with reverence and become more compassionate
about the bodies of others. Easter is our own when it enables us to really live in the
present, so that we can enjoy the mystery of our origin and destination, the mystery of
every being we encounter. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

¹ "Alleluia Christ is risen! Alleluia, Christ is risen!"

² Richard Fabian, "The Vicar of Bray or, Anglican Identity at Prayer." Unpublished book chapter, 5 March 2019 Draft. Page 1.

³ So much of today's nostalgia seems employed to unsettle and exclude our neighbors - whose America, whose past are we talking about?

⁴ Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995) 3-5.

⁵ "Did I not assure good Lincoln Riley, long since, that I should be willing to have limbs rot, and senses dug out, if I could perceive more of God? *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ Matt Boulton, "Dawn: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter Sunday," SALT, 16 April 2019. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/4/16/dawn-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-sunday>

⁷ Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (NY: Penguin, 2017) 69.

⁸ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (NY: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

⁹ Wendell Berry, "To An Unseeable Animal," from *Upholding Mystery: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry* ed. David Impastato (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997) 135-6.