

Remember Jesus Christ, Raised from the Dead

II Timothy 2:8-15

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Remembering can be a great gift. I'm thinking of the gift of remembering because Paul tells Timothy, his young protégé, to remember something. He tells him to remember something so significant that Paul calls it his gospel. The thing Paul calls on Timothy to remember is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel." Paul can call the resurrection his gospel because without the event we know as the crucifixion, without the suffering and death of Jesus, there would be no resurrection. But because Jesus did suffer and die, when God raised him from the dead that victory over death, over sin, and over all the dark and demonic powers of this earth, is the gospel story.

Last week I referred to the whole gospel, to the importance of not only proclaiming the ministry of Jesus that brought healing, wholeness, and hope, but also the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus that was demonstrated on the cross. I referred to Paul writing to the church in Corinth that when he came and preached to them he determined to know one thing and one thing only. That one thing was Christ Jesus crucified. Ah, but the crucifixion loses its meaning if there is no resurrection. Without the resurrection the crucifixion is simply death and defeat. So as Paul begins his first letter to the church in Corinth focusing on the cross, he brings it to a glorious climax with a compelling message about the resurrection in I Corinthians 15. "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." Having challenged Timothy not to be ashamed of the suffering of Christ, Paul now calls on Timothy to remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead."

The children of God were familiar with remembering a resurrection type experience. The Exodus was a resurrection type experience. Israel had languished in a veritable tomb as slaves in Egypt. God acted in a dramatic and powerful way to deliver them from that virtual death to new life. The way Israel remembered the Exodus can serve as a creative model for how we might remember the resurrection.

No sooner did Israel cross the Red Sea on dry land than they began to remember the Exodus. Moses and all the Israelites sang a song recounting the parting of the seas, the safe passage for Israel, and the horse and the rider being swept up in the waters. Not only did they sing, Moses' sister Miriam took a tambourine in her hand and led the women in a victory dance. That type of singing and dancing became ingrained in Israel, as many of the psalms they would sing

recounted the parting of the seas and the dramatic rescue of Israel. Psalm 66 served as our call to worship today, and on a Sunday when Paul is telling Timothy to remember the resurrection, Psalm 66 remembers the Exodus. “Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works on behalf of his children. He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot—come, let us rejoice in him.” How do you remember? You recount the experience in songs, you choreograph a dance that celebrates the victory, and you shake a tambourine that jingles through the air with sounds of triumph.

But even before they actually passed through the Red Sea, God gave them a powerful tool to remember their deliverance. God gave the Israelites the gift of the Passover, a meal that etched in their collective memory the spreading of blood on the doorframes of their houses, the angel of death passing over those homes that were marked with the blood, and the command to remember their deliverance of slavery by keeping the Passover every year, complete with unleavened bread and a sacrificial lamb.

Remembering the Exodus was not just an annual event on the Passover. The Exodus was part and parcel with the great journey to the Promised Land. On that journey God provided daily bread and a day of Sabbath once a week. The Sabbath and the daily bread are both given in Exodus 16. Can we even begin to imagine what a gift it would have been to a people who had served as slaves, who had been abused and beaten down for long years to hear that once a week, every week, they were to take a day of rest? Once they had to make bricks with no straw. Now God said to his beloved children, rest. Weekly Sabbath and daily bread go a long ways to cementing the Exodus in your memory.

At the risk of sounding like one of those late night infomercials I have to say, but wait, there’s more. The giving of the daily bread became a springboard for the giving of the word of God. God’s concern was not simply feeding the stomachs of the Israelites. God desired to feed their souls. It is in the context of the Exodus that we read, “Human beings do not live by bread alone (manna, daily bread) but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” So it was that one day Moses climbed Mount Sinai and he returned with those words of life known as the Ten Commandments. What was Israel to do with those commandments, which sealed the Exodus in their life? These Hebrew children were no longer slaves. They now experienced the incredible gift of being the chosen people of God?

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

If you want some clues on how to go about remembering an event that displays the glory and majesty of God, if you want to remember an event that is a resurrection type experience, if you want to remember something as epic as the Exodus, God has provided multiple means for remembering. But holding up the Exodus as an example for how we might seal something in our memory comes with a risk. Immediately after those beautiful words in Deuteronomy 6 about putting God’s commandments in our hearts and tying them as symbols on our hands and foreheads and writing them on the doorframes of our house there comes this warning. “When the Lord your God brings you into (the Promised Land)—a land with large flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

Forget? How could Israel ever forget the Exodus and the God who brought such dramatic deliverance? And yet Israel did forget. They forgot the Sabbath as they took that sacred day of rest and filled it with countless rules and regulations that would one day make it an offense for Jesus to perform his most basic act of kindness, bringing healing to a person in need. They forgot the commandments, beginning with the first commandment that said you shall have no other gods, bowing down to the gods of Canaan and worshiping idols. They forgot when they went long stretches without celebrating the Passover, the very meal whose remembrance was at the heart of the Exodus. When Paul writes to Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead,” we do well to take those words seriously. If Israel could forget the Exodus, we must face the real possibility that we might forget the great gift of the resurrection.

Remembering can be a powerful gift for good. It can also be a terrible curse. This passage about remembering has brought me face to face with what can only be described as a huge flaw in my character. My memory works great. Why is that a flaw? Because of the things I remember.

- When I was five or six years old my dad signed me up for a program with the YMCA called Indian Guides. We must have studied about tomahawks, an ax-like tool used by American Indians, because one day I set out with a friend to make our own tomahawks. With a hammer and some nails I fashioned a crude tomahawk. I then stuffed it into my pants and prepared to play. But I did a poor job nailing the tomahawk together. When I stuffed it in my pants a nail was sticking out, it pierced my side and I was left with a scar that is still with me today. My memory works great. I remember that day in vivid detail. I carry a mark of that event in my side. I don't think I will ever forget it.
- I remember a day in junior high when my coach sent me out to play right field in our baseball game. I had been on the bench all day, and so I was so excited to rush out and get to be part of the team. A fly ball came my way. I muffed it. The coach yelled at me. Then the next thing I know he sent out someone to take my spot, and I returned to my place on the bench. I was humiliated. Then to top it off I started to cry. That day is etched in my memory.
- I could go on. The memories are not all from childhood. I have a remarkable ability to remember slights and insults and disappointments and failures. I have managed to rehearse them and nurse them and now they have what seems like a permanent place in my memory bank.

I hope I'm alone in this. I would hate for you to have a memory like mine. Why is it that I remember so vividly the hurts, the wounds, the losses, the failures, the disappointments, and the tears? And why do I hear the story we read earlier in worship about ten lepers, ten lepers who are healed by Jesus, why do I hear that story and feel like Jesus is calling me out? Only one came back to give thanks for being healed. I, who remember so well the hurts and disappointments, I find myself forgetting time and time and time and time again to come back to Jesus when he heals, when he blesses, when his mercy and grace envelope my life...I forget to come back and say thanks. I forget to come back and fall on my knees at his feet and say thanks.

If you find yourself facing a similar struggle, then you will understand why it is so important to hear the Apostle Paul telling Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead." If we don't find ways to incorporate the resurrection into every fiber and fabric of our being, we might be among those who forget the resurrection. And if there is no resurrection from the dead, we are left without hope.

How do we remember? I'm still convinced the Exodus gives us numerous examples of how to remember something as important as the resurrection. We remember through song. A while back a contemporary Christian artist named Chris Tomlin took the traditional hymn Amazing Grace and found a way to tie that wonderful hymn of faith into the Exodus. You will recognize the first verses.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

Then the song adds this powerful chorus.

“My chains are gone, I’ve been set free. My God, my Savior has ransomed me. And like a flood his mercy reigns, unending love, amazing grace.”

Chains...ransomed...flood...those are images from the Exodus. And those very images describe what has happened to us as through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been set free from our chains, ransomed by his blood, and washed in the flood of his mercy and unending love. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. Do you have a song you can sing, a song you can cling to as you seek to remember Jesus Christ, our Lord who was raised from the dead?

Israel came out of the Red Sea with a song and a dance. I wish I could dance. When our youth led us in a dance on Rally Day I was always a step behind and clapping at the wrong time. But a dance is a powerful gift for remembrance. Do any of you remember back in the spring when several of our youth performed a sacred dance to the song that comes from Psalm 91? As the song came to the part where it says, “And he will raise you up on eagle’s wings”, Megan was literally lifted up and carried, an image that captures exactly what God does for us. The devil tried to tempt Jesus with words from Psalm 91. The devil told Jesus to throw himself down from a high point and prove God’s promise that the angels would grab him and keep him from falling. Jesus didn’t put God to the test that day. But Jesus did trust God when he went to the cross saying, “Yet not my will, but yours be done.” And God proved that was trustworthy. God did not abandon Jesus to the grave. Sing and dance and as you do, remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead.

The people were told to remember the Exodus by binding reminders on their foreheads and hands and the doorframes of their houses. A long time ago I was in church when a pastor gave a sermon called, "The cross in my pocket." Basically the sermon was about how he carried a cross in his pocket, and every time he grabbed his car keys or reached for some coins or a credit card, he touched that cross. The cross we have with us in worship is empty. Jesus is no longer on the cross. And Jesus is no longer in the tomb. Jesus is risen from the dead, and a cross in your pocket can be an ever present reminder that he is alive.

That annual remembrance of the Exodus that is enacted in the Passover was to be celebrated once a year. That remembrance has become a regular part of Christian worship as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Every time we hear him say the words about his body and blood we draw near to him in worship and adoration, remembering that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

Paul's words to Timothy are of the utmost importance. After he tells Timothy to remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, Paul turns to what he calls a trustworthy saying. Numerous commentators believe this is a brief statement of faith that had already been adopted by the early church. It might have been a baptismal creed.

If we died with him, we will also live with him. (When we are baptized with Christ we die to ourselves, and in dying to ourselves, we live with him and for him. As Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live. Christ lives in me.")

If we endure, we will also reign with him. (Even though Christ is risen from the dead, the followers of Christ will face suffering and sadness and trial and tribulation. But Christ has been raised from dead, and we who endure the trials and tribulations will one day reign with Christ.)

If we disown him, he will also disown us. (Ouch. Even though Christ loves us, died for us, has risen triumphant, we can fall short and we can fail. The disciples pretty much disowned Jesus in his time of need, and there are countless ways we as his disciples today can disown him. Our actions have consequences, and when we turn from our Lord, we bear the brunt of our mistakes. In other words, what we say and do matters.)

Even so, our failures are not the final word. And the final words of this early creed of the Christian church are not "If we disown him, he will also disown us." No, the final words are once again gospel words, words of good news.

If we are faithless, he will remain faithful (O God, we hope this is not the case. O God, we long to be faithful and fruitful and loving and caring. But, if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. Meaning if we forget him, and the resurrection, he will not forget us.

But let's not go there. Let's not disown Jesus. Let's not live faithless lives. Let us remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. Because he is raised from the dead, he has the power to bring life from death. We live in a world where death is present in many forms. Today the good news calls us to remember that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. That is the good news we don't ever want to forget. That is the good news that brings hope to the hopeless, joy to the brokenhearted, and freedom to the captives. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!