

Then They Remembered
Luke 24:1-12
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
April 16, 2017

“Give it up son, it’s not worth it.” They were the last words uttered by Ted Van Sluytman on March 27, 1978. He spoke them to Glenn Flett, one of the two men Ted saw running through the men’s department where he worked at the Hudson Bay department store in Scarborough, Ontario. He had just seen them hold up the Brinks security guards who were carrying the cash from the Easter weekend sales out to their truck. As he reached out to Glenn and his accomplice on that Monday after Easter, his words fell on deaf ears.

Not worth it? There were thousands of dollars in their hands and Glenn and his accomplice both responded by fatally shooting the 40-year-old menswear salesman. And on that day they snatched the life away from at least three people — Ted and Glenn and Ted’s then 15-year-old daughter, Margot. Glenn would be arrested that same day; Margot’s incredibly close family would begin to splinter, and her life would spin out of control. She would lash out at her own wellbeing, become bulimic, run away from home within a year, and even attempt to take her own life. Eventually, she would begin therapy, continue her education and even become a poet. She would search for ways to use poetry for victims of crime to find peace—a peace that still eluded her. She would write books on the subject, found a non-profit publishing house, and become one of Canada’s most renowned experts on poetry as therapy for criminals and crime victims. On the surface, she had transformed her pain into hope for others.

Glenn would grieve for the first few years of his prison sentence, convinced his life was over. Thanks to a thoughtful prison chaplain, he would begin to explore Christian faith as a way to make sense of his future, and he began to seek an education. Eventually he married his prison instructor, Sherry, and then together — first with him inside, then with him on parole — they would spend the next 30 years trying to make sure that other men didn’t make the same mistake. They founded LINC, Long-term Inmates Now in Community, with Glenn committing himself to rehabilitating prisoners — helping them turn their lives around, empowering them to make good choices. It would be work that would have its share of successes and failures, and the failures particularly would exhaust him and place him at risk as some of the men he worked with took advantage of him or returned to violent crime. Each of these failures piled more guilt and stress on Glenn to the point that, exhausted and on anti-depressants, he would be arrested for reckless driving, have his parole revoked, and spend 11 more months in jail. In the words of the judge who praised him even as he sentenced him — so that the ticking time-bomb Glenn had become could be defused, so he could rest and realize that he alone couldn’t save everyone.

There they were, two people who had turned their lives around from the same tragedy, or so it appeared. But down deep there was still something dead, something that all of their work to make things better for others would not heal, could not revive.

Then Glenn’s wife, Sherry, made what she thought was an anonymous donation to Margot’s publishing non-profit organization. But Margot saw the name and she remembered; she remembered that was the name of the man who had murdered her father, and so she wrote back.

Glenn, who had tried to contact the family before but been rebuffed, was now afraid. He wanted to apologize, but he didn't want to traumatize Margot, or trivialize what had happened. So Sherry began an online conversation with the daughter of the man he had murdered. And eventually, in the midst of those conversations, Sherry would become the go-between in the tentative contact Margot would make with Glenn. In the midst of those conversations again Margot remembered; she remembered a statement her mother had made to a news reporter years before, within days of her father's murder. Her mother had been asked if she would forgive the man who killed her husband and she had said, "I already have. I forgive so that I can live." At the time, Margot remembered being offended and a bit hurt by her mother's statement. But now it opened a possibility.

And Glen, though holding tightly to his guilt and fear that kept him from reaching out to Margot on his own, remembered what her father had said that day, "Give it up, son. It's not worth it." Would it be worth it to give up his fear, to give up his desperate and debilitating attempts at preventing any other men from taking the path he had taken?

They remembered and it brought both of them within a few weeks to Westminster Abbey, the beautiful, glass-walled chapel of the Benedictine monastery in Mission, British Columbia. There they met, wept, embraced and talked. He apologized and she accepted his apology. And somehow that dead place down deep within each of them was alive again. Remembering something that hadn't registered in the past now transformed both of their lives and many more since. Margot now calls her poetry therapy practice Sawbonna. I included it on one of our Lenten bulletins a few weeks ago. It's a Zulu greeting that means both "hello" and "I see you."

Glenn and his wife are still changing lives and reducing recidivism with their important work with ex-cons, but he is no longer driving himself to exhaustion frantically trying to do so much good in a futile effort to erase what he did. Margot has found a peace that she has not known for 30 years, and feels more authentic in the work she is doing. They are both alive again because they remembered and there was resurrection.¹

Remembering is central to Luke's version of the resurrection story. We get only the beginning of it today, the part without Jesus. Did you notice that? His name is not uttered in today's text. He makes no mysterious appearance in these 12 verses. He is not there.

We journey with them to the empty tomb that morning, perplexed by a world where things seem out of control. Despots threaten death; powers that be seem obsessed with power and prestige; and, as we journey out to the place of death, we are exhausted by shock and disbelief at what has been going on all around us. It is as though we have awakened from a nightmare, unsure of where we are and what is going on.

And there it is; the tomb is empty; the body is missing. And first thoughts are not of some ridiculous story of life from death but more of the same — the powers that killed him have snatched the body away, afraid we will make this a shrine. Or perhaps it was just run-of-the-mill grave robbers. Regardless, the death-ritual materials, which are in our hands, which we hoped could bring some order to chaos, are useless.

¹Margot and Glenn's story can be found here:

<http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/margot-van-sluytman-canada/>

and here: <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/im-sorry-im-sorry-im-sorry/>

In the midst of this mystery, messengers appear with the oddest of question: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” How unkind, to mock the pain. They weren’t there on Friday; they clearly haven’t watched the news. The death is real. What can they mean, other than to be cruel?

And then come those words — Don’t you remember, remember what he told you? That he would suffer and die, but on the third day be raised? Yes, they had heard it before, three times according to Luke. But it always seemed ridiculous. But now, now in their remembering, what they see makes some sense. Like those awaking from a nightmare, they remember who and where they are in Jesus’ prophecy. The trauma of the last three days had been enough to give anyone temporary amnesia out of self-preservation. But now, with the messenger’s prompting, Jesus is raised. Resurrection is real.

Oh, the men will need more proof. We’ll see some of that next week. But just remembering, being taken back to those moments when he was with them, hearing his confident prediction of how the powers that be would not let his message — of hospitality and equality before God, of opposing oppression and exploitation — go un-confronted. His further prediction that death would not have the final say with him, that he would, indeed, be raised. It was insane at the time. They couldn’t hear it. Like Glenn, they were even offended by it, like Margot. But now, now they remembered. And it changed everything. Remembering his promises — remembering his hopeful message, remembering his declaration of freedom from being defined by the expectations of others, freedom from being defined by anything other than God’s undying grace and love — they could reclaim those promises and live as though they were true; they could live in faith that they were true. And that changed everything; he changed everything. And they were indeed alive again.

On this Easter Sunday, 2017, what do you need to remember? What do we need to remember for resurrection to be real for us? Where are the places that — despite all of our best efforts, our good works, our thinking things through, our logic, our therapy, our prayers — that refuse to be fully alive within us?

Maybe old disappointments have left dead dreams moldering somewhere. Maybe broken relationships have walled off the parts of our hearts we withhold from new loves. Maybe it’s bad choices or self-condemnation that have built scar tissue around our peace of mind and ability to let go of what we or others have done in the past. I would hazard that each of us has a place that is in desperate need of resurrection.

What do we need to remember? That loving and being loved makes us more alive? That compassion is not a zero-sum game? That there is no such thing as winning at life, only living each day as the gift that it is? They all seem like platitudes we toss around when we don’t have something more profound to say. But they all are born from the same place. The truth that nothing defines any of us but that we are created in the loving, gracing image of a loving, gracing God, whose only wish for us is a life obedient to a very simple creed — to love the source of our being and all that being has created, including one another and ourselves. In that simple wish there is life abundant and life eternal; there is resurrection hope; there is life where the world sees only death. And that place, that may be within me, may be within you today where death still holds sway. But remembering who and whose we are — remembering the power of love and grace to transform even the most death-choked relationships, remembering Jesus raised — the act of remembering who each of us is in the eyes of our loving God is like new life transplanted into those dead places within.

Today, as they gather for Easter services at the First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, North Carolina, Hayley and Noah Allen will be the living examples of this resurrection hope. Just a few months ago, Noah was in crisis. Diagnosed as a teenager with kidney disease, the 27-year-old, married father of two little boys discovered the remission that he had enjoyed for over a decade was over, and time was short. His dying kidneys were poisoning him from the inside out. In desperation, Hayley created, of all things, a Facebook post: “I need your help. I need prayer warriors. I need advocates. And I need a living donor. We don’t know who that living donor is just yet — maybe a family member, maybe a friend, maybe a Good Samaritan — but he or she is out there, and we are going to find him or her.”²

Ami Bardi remembered Hayley. They had served as bridesmaids together in a mutual friend’s wedding a few years before, and this led to the Facebook connection. She and her husband, Wyatt, lived on the other end of North Carolina, but she remembered Hayley and remembered that they had two infant sons. She had lost two pregnancies to miscarriage and, remembering this ailing family had two little ones who might lose their father, drew her into the Allen’s story. So she shared it with Wyatt and he remembered how he had identified the Good Samaritan as the model for his personal faith journey, how he felt called to respond to the needs of those he didn’t know. He remembered the story and encouraged Ami to reach out. A month ago yesterday Noah received his new kidney from Wyatt. His own kidney function had reduced to 9 percent. The doctor after the surgery told him he was death walking. Now Wyatt and Noah are in constant contact. They’ve exchanged Apple Watches, of all things, and linked them so they can monitor one another’s heart beats as they both continue therapy and strengthening workouts at opposite ends of the state. Ami and Hayley are in daily contact, too. Ami remembered; Wyatt remembered; and on this Resurrection Sunday, like Pastor Jessica and her mother, they are celebrating new life — new resurrection hope.

Friends, as we go from this place today back into a world where death and its minions — fear, hatred and despair — seem to be holding sway, let us remember to remember, to put back together the lives we were created to live, the world we were created to share. Let us be confident — like the women who rush back from the tomb — that as we live in our Resurrection hope, we will encounter the risen one already out there at work, bringing new life and new hope. Alleluia, Amen.

²Read more here: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/living/religion/article144424889.html#storylink=cpy>. Many thanks to Noah and Hayley’s pastor, Rev. Pen Peery, a member of The Well, for bringing their story to my attention.