

Remember Jesus Christ!

sermon digest

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Luke 23:54-24-8; 2 Timothy 2:8-13

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I was only three when my family moved from Hobbs, New Mexico, to Houston, Texas; but I carried with me the memory of a friend. Tom Fred was a year older and wiser, and his father owned a small community grocery store. For several years I recalled in vivid detail a summer day. We were playing outside his father's store. Tom Fred carefully stationed me at the door with instructions to hold it open when he returned. He sauntered up to the counter. While his father was busy with a customer, he reached into the candy display, filled both hands, and ran for the door, which I held open to expedite his getaway. His father found us behind the store dividing the loot. While I looked on, he admonished Tom Fred and recovered the stolen candy. Then, before returning to his store, he gave each of us a piece of candy with a final lesson on asking rather than taking.

For several years I remembered Tom Fred and our short life of crime. Eventually my memory faded until I only remembered a memory. Over the years, I questioned the accuracy of my childhood memory. Could I have possibly remembered such vivid detail at such a young age? Did I create the event out of my longing for a friendship that had passed away? Did my older sisters play tricks with my mind, planting memories that never were my own?

Christians remember. Thursday evening we gathered around a memory that has been retained by Christians for more than nineteen centuries. We broke the bread and repeated words that were passed down to the earliest Christians. However, the words are found only in the Gospel of Luke and Paul's first letter to Corinthians: "Do this in remembrance of me." I think that we all understood that we were observing a tradition, playing out history in the church's ritualized memory. We worshiped God in that service, even though the details of the event actually belonged to the first disciples who gathered in the upper room on the night that Jesus was arrested. But the story was so important that it was extended to the larger body believers and repeated in future generations. The Lord's Supper eventually became the church's memory. Finally the story was written in the Gospels to preserve it for generations to come, and we have taken the story into our own life stories and found the same God present among us now.

As we entered the modern age, Christians began to question the ability of the human mind to retain the facts of memory. A century ago, Albert Schweitzer was among a growing company of New Testament scholars who concluded that we have retained very little of the actual history of Jesus, almost none of his actual sentences. Rather, we hold memories of memories of memories of memories that have lost connection to the detailed facts.

University of North Carolina professor of religion Bart Ehrman has become something of a sensation in recent years with books like *Misquoting Jesus* about the failure of early Christians to retain the actual words and history of Jesus. Applying the historical skepticism of the modern era to the antiquated documents of early Christianity, Ehrman finally concluded that the only certainty about Jesus that he could retain was the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." Ehrman then joined the company of agnostics and skeptics, whose interest in history is an obsession with the science rather than the story, the facts rather than the faith.

Could the problem be with us rather than with the Gospels? What if the early Christians did not share our obsession with facts and the evidence of proof? In the Jewish mind memory was much more than a mental exercise to retain historical fact.

Long before the time of Christ, more than any other primitive people, the Hebrews grasped the importance of history and wrote down their memories for posterity, but they kept neither video nor audio records of the facts. For example, the stories of the Exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law, the miraculous feeding of the people in the wilderness, or the shape and size of the Tabernacle were not concerned with the preservation of scientific facts. Rather they were concerned to illustrate the truth about God and the truth about people living under the reality of God. The Jews passed down stories from parents to children to illustrate the nature of God and the foundations of hope for the nation. Concern about getting all the facts straight is a modern issue related to our scientific age. The Jews told stories. If God delivered his people Israel from bondage to promise, then every generation that worships God holds to the same promise. Remembering God was never about retaining the facts

of the case. It was always about keeping the reality of God constantly in mind. It was not so much about the fear of forgetting the facts as it was the lapse into an assumption of the absence and unimportance of God. To remember God was less about what had happened in the past than about the present decision and the future promise of the life of faith.

Luke was probably written some fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Only Luke contains the word addressed to the women: "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. Then they remembered his words."

The situation of early Christians was not far removed from our own experience. As time marched on they could recite the words passed down from previous generations and observe the rites that had become essential to the life of the church, but they did not recall a history that they had experienced firsthand. However, they did worship God. They repeated a story that they had received from the early witnesses and now incorporated into their faith. Christians like their Jewish forebears were never people of fact; they were always a people of faith. But more important than the facts of history, was the present truth of worship. God was not buried somewhere in the desert of Sinai, and Jesus was not entombed somewhere in Galilee in biographical details of his life. To remember Jesus is to walk with him in the light of today and to live with him into the hope of tomorrow.

Christ lives in our remembrance. Luke was onto something important not only for himself and the needs of second and third generation Christians, but something critical for all who would follow in the way of Christ.

Four Gospels agree that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Only Luke elaborates the story. Jesus was taunted not only by the antagonists at the foot of the cross but by one of the criminals condemned to die with him. The criminal mocked the messianic claim and called for Jesus to save himself. The other criminal defended the innocence of Jesus and pled, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (23:39). The man was not seeking a place in history. He was not asking to have his name written down in a book for posterity to behold. He was not concerned with getting his cause preserved in stone so that it could weather the winds of time. To be remembered must have had something to do with the promise of Jesus from the cross: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The confession of faith recorded in 2 Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead," was probably written sometime after Luke. This was not a call to remember events or experiences that were part of the biographies of the people addressed. Christians were called to hold onto the reality of Jesus in the spiritual self. It was something like the word of Paul to the Philippians: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Hold onto the living Christ in your thoughts. Keeping in mind the reality of his presence is the pathway of endurance to the eternal glory.

Every Easter I remember. For about five years as a teenager, I rehearsed with a community choir gathered from churches in Houston in preparation for a sunrise service on Easter morning. It was sponsored and paid for by the Forest Park Cemetery. We used to call them cemeteries or graveyards. In rural communities, they are in the churchyard. Many have been reinvented as "memorial gardens" promising contractually "perpetual care."

We gathered at 5:00 AM outside the chapel building of Forest Park Cemetery under a large pavilion opening to a pond and a forest of gravestones as far as the eye could see. Promptly at 7:00 AM we opened the service with an anthem, "Lift Up Your Doors, O Ye Gates," from Psalm 24. I was always amazed at the hundreds of people who came to hear the same anthems, sing the same hymns, and listen to a similar message by one of Houston's leading pastors; and I wondered about who they were and why they had come. I harbored no illusions about their interest in our choir or the preacher or sermon of the day. I suspect now as then that many of them had been there before. They had buried their dead. They had ritualized the cloture of a life and the beginning of the journey of grief. They had come to remember a parent or child or friend or spouse and prayed that they had not been forgotten in the mind of God.

Every Easter morning as we gathered at the cemetery I thought of the words of the Gospel: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." The Christ is not entombed

outside Jerusalem, nor is he buried in some memorial park with stone markers and marble statues. Christ lives within and among his people, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead...that is *our* gospel!"