

“A New Creation”

A sermon preached on Luke 24:1-12

*by Emily Hull McGee on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

One Wednesday night a couple of weeks ago, my kids and their village here were playing while I packed up my things. Our official gathering here had ended, and my three little ones were laughing down in Kelly Auditorium with a handful of their teachers and leaders. Part of their delight had come in the form of a bag full of Easter goodies — candy and little toys and a bunny-ear-and-cotton-tail set that Annabelle promptly put on with a squeal. But part of it came as they played a rousing game of “guess my age.” “Guess how old I am, Liam?,” Kim asked. 144! (Riotous laughter ensued.) “What about me, Annabelle?” 17! (It’s a fraught game, no matter how you slice it!)

The game continued as we walked to the car, Annabelle and I holding hands as we crossed the street. “How old are you, mommy?,” she asked. “Ugh,” I said loudly, “I’m 37! I’m getting old!” And bouncing across the street with those bunny ears and tail catching the warm breeze and the final rays of sunset, Annabelle said to me without skipping a beat: “No you’re not, mommy. You’re getting new!”

II.

I know I’m biased as her mom and all, but in my mind that night, Annabelle joined the ranks of the brave proclaimers of resurrection before her, right? It’s an Easter proclamation for the ages! *You’re not getting old, you’re getting new!* For even when we’d sooner remember and lament, even when we’d rather choose the certainty of what we know or where we’ve

been, even when we'd prefer what we've experienced or who we once were, the good news of Easter is that in Christ, God has done something new. And through Christ's death and resurrection, God is making a new creation out of all the world. Or as one writer said, "The bad news is God doesn't promise to make anybody young. The good news is that God promises to make all things new."¹

II.

I have become an early riser in recent years — not so much by choice, but out of necessity. And in my experience, there is just something mysterious about the time before dawn. It's dark out, which never fails to disorient me as I have to think hard when I awaken — is it nighttime? Is it morning? Did I oversleep? Did I ever fall asleep in the first place? The quiet of the night and all the possibilities of the morning seem to hang together, suspended between what has been and what will be in this space that Luke calls "early dawn."

It's that mystery of the "liquid edge between day and night" that I hold in my mind imagining the morning that Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, Joanna, and others made their way to the tomb.² Each gospel writer tells this story differently, but all make clear — *encounters with the risen Christ begin in the dark*. For it's in the dark when all hope seems lost, when death seems to have won, when the end has drawn near. In the dark, the

¹ Richard Lischer, "Your Future Is Too Small," <https://www.faithandleadership.com/your-future-too-small>

² Beautiful description of dawn from Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, p19.

formless voids cover the face of our deep. In the dark, the fears and doubts and angers that hide out during the day find a place to be confronted.

In the dark — in the spaces in between an end and a beginning — life and suffering happens. Cracks turn to gaping wounds in a marriage. Tubes and machines and beeps and medicine work powerlessly against the impending march of death. Backroom deals are made to profit on the backs of the poor. That which seduces our attention, our loyalty, our utter commitment calls out from the bottle, the screen, the office, the deepest recesses of our heart we'd sooner overlook. Decisions are made. Vows are broken. Violence erupts. And all the lies that would have us to believe that only with more power, more control, more money, more stuff, more beauty, more youth, more time might we really begin to see evidence of light and life — those lies cause us to forget who and whose we are in the first place.

But in the dark — from the dark — is precisely where God began to create in the beginning of all that is. In the dark, bulbs are plunged into the soil, roots spread and stretch, bodies rest and muscles repair, creation catches a second wind. In the dark, we find that as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “what is most true is not always evident by the bright light of day.” For in the dark, God said “let there be light.” In the dark, resurrection unfolds. In the dark, a new creation begins to emerge. In the dark, the terror felt by a group of women in an empty tomb turns to amazement — precisely as they are invited to remember.

III.

For you see, unlike the Gospel of John whose first instance of resurrection is an encounter with Jesus himself, Luke begins where it all

ended – there at the empty tomb. The women who we left on Friday preparing the ointment and spices to care for Jesus’s body in death were the ones who were returning on Sunday, “the first day of the week at early dawn.” They came back to the tomb to do their work of Love even in death, but they came back to the tomb also to remember, to do as one does when a beloved one has died – tell the stories, gather ‘round the table, laugh and cry all in one moment, wonder how things could have been different if death had not found their friend. For the tomb was a site of memory, the *mnema* in the Greek which, quite literally, means “a sign of remembrance.”³

But the memories that these faithful disciples of Jesus were calling to mind surely fell away that morning, for when they arrived and found that the stone had been rolled away and the body gone missing, Luke tells us they were perplexed. When suddenly two men – dazzling as angels – stood beside them with a question that rings throughout time and space: *why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen!*

REMEMBER. Remember how he told you that this would happen? Remember how he said he’d be handed over, crucified, and would rise again on the third day? Do you remember?

The Greek term for “remember” here - *mimnesko* - is muscular and active. It means more than just mere recollection, and includes a call “to bring past actions to bear on the present, with new power and insight.”⁴ It’s a beginning, it’s a crack of light across the horizon, it’s the dawn of a new day.

³ Holly Hearon, Commentary on Luke 24:1-12, Working Preacher, 4/21/19, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4036.

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

It's the kind of remembering that these friends of Jesus can't help but to share. For even as they sort out what this means, even as bewilderment and astonishment follow them, even as the night turns to morning, these women are the first apostles, the first to bear witness to what God has done. They tell the good news. They proclaim it. They share it. They announce the mystery that from the darkness comes the light, from the end comes a beginning, from death and destruction comes a new creation. For the good news they feel — even as they fumble in the dark — is that God in Christ is making all things new!

IV.

This spring, our congregation has been telling stories of our becoming, stories of how God is at work, stories that dig up relics from our past to unearth them in light of our present. A few weeks ago, our topic was “Becoming Apostles: Stories from those God has sent,” and we heard from a number of people who have followed the call of God to the Dominican Republic as we marked 20 years of partnership and transformation with the communities of Cielo and Nazaret. They told stories of the moments of doubt felt under a tree in the warm breeze, the church house they built, the rows and rows of bags for rice and beans they filled and delivered. And behind the stories were the pictures, stretching back some twenty years of bad 1990s fashion and big hair and youth.

Over and over again in those early pictures we saw was the smiling face of John Jordan, there with his wife Phronsie, both early adopters of the significance of this ongoing ministry for First Baptist. John was no stranger to construction — he was handy around the house. He served on the House &

Grounds Committee. And in fact, alongside another one of our departed saints Charlie Bris-Bois, John joined with a crew of retired men who shared a heart for others to start Serving Our Savior, an organization thriving still today that builds wheelchair ramps each week for members of our community!

But in between those trips to the DR, cancer crept in like a thief and stole John's body and mind. After his death in September, Phronsie returned to the DR alone in January, carrying with her a container of John's ashes. For there was a grove of banana trees down an embankment, she tells me, where another of John's friends from their time in the DR once had his ashes scattered. "You know, I want to do that too someday," John told Phronsie, never guessing it would be so soon that Phronsie would do just that. But with his death fresh in her spirit, tears and memory and love above all else as her guide, that's what she did.

Several years after John's ashes found their final resting place, Phronsie came back to Cielo for the annual women's trip. But to her horror, she found that the grove of banana trees had been bulldozed to the ground: concrete and metal and steel erected over the ground where her beloved found final rest. Grief resurfaced again, with sighs and groans too deep for words. But in the familiar darkness of grief, Phronsie looked again, more carefully this time and spotted new life. For in precisely the spot where John's ashes were buried into the soil: "wouldn't you know it," she told me with the smile of one who has wept at the foot of the cross and been astonished by what God has done, "*there was a wheelchair ramp standing in its place.*"

V.

Phronsie knew it when she saw that ramp. Isaiah knew it when he voiced God's promise: "for I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating!" The women at the tomb and the disciples who followed knew it, as they made sense of what they had seen and heard in an empty tomb at dark and the call to remember. Paul knew it when he said, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" And this church knows it, even as signs of construction surround our church house as we work to bring it back to life.

"Because of the truth the Easter story embodies," one preacher says, "once you walk up to that tomb and see it empty with the stone rolled back, you cannot go back to your life the way it was. You cannot go back to the world the way it was. Once you walk up to that tomb and see it empty with the stone rolled back, the clock starts running out on the former things."⁵

Friends, you're not getting younger. Your grief and suffering is not going away. You will still experience fear, anger, indifference, pain, loneliness, forgetting from time to time who and whose you are. But through the cross, we know there is no suffering that Christ has not born, no grief he has not withstood, no act of violence he cannot liberate, no isolation he cannot redeem. Death is never the end.

For friends, you belong to God! Love is stronger than death! A new dawn is breaking through the darkness! In Christ, you are being made new!

⁵ Pendleton B. Peery, "Luke 24:1-12," *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke*, vol. 2, p348.

So now as you remember with power and insight and action, how now will **you** tell that story?

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen.