

## **MARK 16:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." <sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

## **LUKE 24:13-49**

<sup>13</sup> Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" <sup>19</sup>He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup>Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." <sup>25</sup>Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

<sup>28</sup>As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup>But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is

almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup>When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” <sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” <sup>35</sup>Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## **SERMON**

We’re forgetful people. And I seriously doubt any of you will contradict me on that point. Even on my best days, with my clearest mind and sharpest memory, there’s always something I forget. It just happens. If I don’t write it down on my calendar, that’s a guarantee I will forget to show up. If I don’t put my keys back in the same spot every time I come home, I can be sure that leaving the house later is going to take me an additional 5 minutes of searching for said keys. I keep at least 5 different kinds of to do lists around my office and home, just to be sure I don’t forget anything that needs to be done. If laundry detergent isn’t on the grocery list, there’s no way I’ll remember to buy it at the store.

In fact, there are all sorts of products being sold to help all of us with our memory. You can buy a keychain that connects to the Internet. When you forget your keys somewhere, all you need to do is look them up, literally online, and the computer will tell you where that magic keychain can be found. This week Amazon released what may be the most ridiculous product I’ve ever seen, they call it the dash button. Did you guys see this? Yeah, it’s like a tiny button that you attach to your washing machine, and it says “Tide” in big orange letters across the front. It also connects to the internet, and if you’re

running low on laundry detergent, you just press the magic button, Amazon charges your credit card, and two days later a bucket of Tide Detergent shows up on your porch. Amazon is betting that we will pay a bit more for the convenience of ordering with literally the touch of a button, rather than retain control of comparing price and brand, but potentially forget to purchase detergent next time we're at the store. They're betting the same is true for Gatorade and Olay skin products and all sorts of other tiny, branded dash buttons.

And I get why these products sell. We're forgetful people. We need our to do lists, our calendars, our strings tied around the finger. We forget way too easily.

And just like Amazon and other marketers, religions have always been really good at helping us to remember. It's one of their primary functions: to help us remember the stories we think are important, the rules we want to live by, the things we should find important. We do this in a number of ways. We gather every week to tell our stories. We sing songs, which have been proven over and over again to be one of the best ways our brain remembers stuff. We repeat some prayers again and again, like the Lord's Prayer for Christians, or the Shema for Jews, or the Shahada for Muslims. When I go and visit folks in the hospital or nursing home, there's one thing I always count on. No matter how advanced the Alzheimer's or memory loss may be, if I start praying "Our Father, who art in heaven..." or if I start to sing "Jesus loves me, this I know..." 4 out of 5 times, the person I'm visiting will start singing along with me. We've repeated those songs and prayers so many times, they're in our bones. We know them from almost literal muscle memory alone, no matter how gone our minds may be.

The other thing religions do really well to promote memory is that we're masters of the symbol. We love any object that can represent something else. I could probably stand up here and just list off Christian symbols for the next 20 minutes without stopping, there are so many of them. And symbols, at their best, are a fabulous tool for our memory. The best symbols take everyday objects, things we see all the time, in our homes, on the road, at work, and then layer them with other meanings. Oh, that apple, it's not just a healthy snack, it's also a reminder of what happens when people put their own will above the will of God. That rainbow in the sky, it's not just a pretty cross of rain and sun, it's a reminder that God loves us and will never destroy the earth in anger again. When we see these everyday things, they jog our sluggish brains and point us back toward something important and valuable.

And Easter is chock full of symbols. There's the egg, of course. The egg has a whole bunch of stories and legends behind it. One story is that the egg is supposed to remind us of the empty tomb, and the egg hunt reminds us of how the women went to find Jesus in the tomb that Sunday morning, but they did not find him there, all they found was an empty shell.

There are other, older symbols as well. The pomegranate is one of the most ancient symbols of Easter in the early church, and it's actually one of the few symbols you'll find in every major world religion, today. Some of the earliest tile floors and Christian art we've been able to find have pomegranates on them. It's a fruit that's obviously common around the Mediterranean, where the church started, so people would see it all the time. And to the early

Christians, the pomegranate reminded them first of blood. If you've ever tried to seed a pomegranate, you'll get why. It's a mess, and that dark red juice splatters everything and gets everywhere. It looks like blood. And so for Christians, as for many other faiths, pomegranates come to symbolize suffering. But then, weirdly, pomegranates are also a symbol of fertility and new life. When you break it open, along with all that red juice, the seeds pour out, it's full of potential. So, for the early church, it's not hard to see how the pomegranate came to connect with Easter: we're reminded of suffering, but in the midst of suffering, there's this outpouring of life and vitality and energy. It's a beautiful symbol.

Peacock feathers, butterflies, spring flowers, lambs, bunnies, green grass, rainbows, eggs, pomegranates, three empty crosses. Each, in their own way, is a sign and a symbol of the hope of the resurrection. They remind us that life can be brought out of death. They jar our forgetful human brains into remembering the hope of Easter.

And our story for today, it's not the most typical of Easter stories, but it's one of my favorites because of how memory plays out. Two men are walking along a road, headed toward the town of Emmaus, and then along comes a third man. They don't recognize him...they don't remember who he is...but being kind and welcoming, they invite the stranger to walk with them for the day. As the three men walk along, the stranger says, "So, what are you guys talking about?" And the two men are a bit dumbfounded: "How can you ask that? Has your head been buried in the sand? Haven't you picked up a newspaper? We're talking about the same thing everyone's talking about! This man, Jesus, he died, and then these women, his friends,

claimed that he wasn't in his tomb, that he was risen from the dead. How could you have missed this?"

And I love the stranger's response to them, which is pretty much, "You think I'm forgetful? Have you forgotten everything the scriptures say? Have you forgotten this story? Don't you remember? The messiah would die, but be raised again! Here, let me remind you..." and then he proceeds to spend the rest of the day recounting the entire Hebrew Bible, retelling them the stories of their faith, the stories of the prophets, of Moses, of Abraham. Reminding these forgetful men of the stories of their faith.

And then the sun starts to set, and they near a house, and the men invite the stranger in to stay. He takes them up on the offer, and they gather at the table for dinner. As they're eating, the stranger grabs a loaf of bread, he give thanks to God, breaks it in two, and hands the pieces to Cleopas and his friend, and then he disappears. The two men, in that moment, as their fingers touch the bread, they remember. They remember everything. That stranger, it wasn't a stranger at all, it was Jesus! Didn't their very hearts burn within them as they talked? And he isn't dead, he's alive, just like the women said. Just like the stories promised. His body was broken, like the loaf of bread, but he is alive, living bread for the world. In that moment, in the breaking of the bread, these men are shaken out of their forgetfulness, and they remember. And they don't just remember, they experience new life. This is my body given for you.

We are forgetful people. It's a part of who we are. And God knows this about us. We forget our keys, we forget the detergent, we forget the stories we've been told. We forget that Jesus rose again, and that

new life will always win out over death. And that's ok that we forget, because quite frankly, we're surrounded by other forgetful people, and these thoughts are big and impossible to fully understand, and sometimes they're even a bit challenging to us. We're going to forget. And that's why we celebrate. That's why we come back, Sunday after Sunday, Easter after Easter, day after day. We come back to tell our stories again. To see the light of the Christ Candle, to smell the potent new flowers, to taste the bread, to hear the songs, to touch the hand of the forgetful person sitting next to us. We come back to be reminded of this good and durable hope: Jesus Christ is risen today. The tomb is empty, he is not there, he is alive.

So, let us come, together, to this table. Let us smell and touch and taste and hear and see our story one more time. Let us once again let our hearts burn within us, as our eyes are opened to the presence of our living God in the bread that is broken and the wine that is poured.