

Consequential Recall

At a time like 6:12 a.m. on a Sunday, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and other women went to the tomb where Jesus was laid expecting to find his decaying body. It was the first day of the week and their traditional Sabbath had ended.

They went to the tomb with heavy hearts as the death of Jesus had dashed their hopes and dreams. They, like many followers, had been encouraged by the promises Jesus made to them about his coming kingdom. There was the promise of the Word of God growing within them like a seed in the ground, their hearts seizing the Word and holding on no matter what, until there is a harvest. But with Jesus' death, the promise of growth in the soil, a firm connection to the word, and a throng of people praising God was void.

Followers had witnessed the compassion of Jesus for a widow's situation. Her only son had died and with it her hopes for a life free from poverty. They were there when Jesus came upon the funeral procession, went to the body of the dead son and raised him to life. That day the witnesses were quietly worshipful, and then noisily grateful, calling out "God is back, looking to the needs of his people!" But the reality of this Sunday was that Jesus had died and with his death, all their hopes died, too.

Instead it was back to business as usual. The world that they hoped would be different was now sadly not. It was another day and another week where the way of the rich and powerful would prevail, imposing their will on others, taking away from others while increasing their own strength.

The women went to the tomb to enact rituals of death. They went to the tomb because doing so would help them to grieve. They went resigning themselves to a world where promises are continually broken, where dreams are constantly defeated, and where hopes are like fantasies. They returned to the struggle for survival. There was nothing to hope in. The only thing they could count on was death.

When the women arrived at the tomb and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus they were perplexed. They were looking for the dead among the dead. The absence of Jesus' body did not make sense. They were at a loss as to what to think and what to do. In a world of broken promises, where not even Jesus was able to keep his promises, and instead got himself killed, a world where death has the final word, they were not expecting this. They brought their spices and ointments to tend to Jesus' body. To find Jesus' dead body would be to confirm what happens in the world where the common person is oppressed.

So they could not make sense of the turn of events. When Jesus died they had already easily turned back to the way things were, hopeless. But now with the tomb empty, they were filled with uncertainty. Had Jesus' body been stolen? Dead bodies don't disappear on their own powers.

As readers of this story we might be tempted to make fun of these women. But the truth is we don't always look at the world with a view to a hopeful future. We, too, easily see the despair rather than the possibility. We quickly judge others as untrustworthy rather than seek to develop a relationship where we put ourselves on the line for the other. We easily get stuck on what is not happening, rather than what is.

Life would have been such a blessing if Jesus had been right: if God could be trusted, if the hungry could be filled with good things, if sins could be forgiven, if enemies could be loved, if sinners could be welcomed, if the lost could be found, if the vulnerable could be blessed, if the lion could lie down with the lamb, and if we could really love one another as Jesus has loved us. But again, for them, Jesus is dead.

Suddenly two messengers of the divine stood beside them saying, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." The women were terrified. Their oldest memory of God kicked in. You dare not look directly at the presence of God lest you die. How easy it is to gravitate to the negative. It takes an intentional word to be turned to the positive. They bowed their faces to the ground in terror. But the messengers continued, "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."

Remember. The scriptures tell us that the women remembered and from that point the world changed. Faith was grasped by the heart and life became new.

What is it that they remembered? Maybe if we remember exactly what they did we can have the key to life? Was it one teaching that suddenly occurred to them and then they understood that Jesus had risen from the dead? Is that how memory works? Do you know how memory works?

Memory is not so much a singular entity as a process. Memory is not located in one place in the brain but it engages processes throughout the brain. It begins with perception, that is, the kind of information we take in with our senses. Information gets encoded in brain cells as electrical pulses and chemical messages fire across synapses. One retrievable memory can contain a variety of sensory memories which get encoded over some time.

Have you ever fallen in love? When you recall your beloved it is likely a memory that is a combination of experiences. You probably have a visual memory like the color of her eyes, or the way he walked, the reverberation of the beloved's voice, the scent of perfume or cologne, and the touch of a hand. All of those sensory memories come together to create one single experience of your beloved. Different parts of your brain collaborate to analyze and encode data. The brain organizes and reorganizes itself in response to your experiences, forming memories triggered by what you do, what you learn and what you practice. A single strong memory is layer upon layer plus clusters of experiences and knowledge. It should be no surprise that the more you pay attention, the stronger the memory. Knowing that you are loved helps with the motivation.

Memory is complex. Together the experience, learning, and practice leads to a stronger memory.

We know a bit of how memory and teaching works. Parents tend to repeat things even though their kids believe that much of that repetition is unnecessary. Often parents are not just giving a set of rules to follow, but in their care for their kids they try to help them make sense alongside the experience of everyday life. Do you remember sayings your mom or dad or grandparents repeated along with the experience which prompted the teaching?

"What goes around comes around." You had better think before you act. Maybe the more positive teaching was also added. "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

“After laughing comes crying.” I heard this was a favorite of a mother of four boys. They had to figure out when they had gone too far as there were bound to be scrapes and bruises as they ended up in each other’s space.

The women at the tomb had many memories because they had followed Jesus for some time. They had witnessed many events and teachings. They were interested in what Jesus was saying and doing. They were hoping that what he had promised would come true. They had been looking for the world to change until Jesus’ suffered and died on the cross.

The divine messengers came with an intentional word, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? His is not here, but has risen. 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.”

Remember. They heard the message and recalled how Jesus had said those words which had seemed so strange at first. Jesus had repeated them over and over. Now, on this first day of the week, when they were asked to recall them at the empty tomb, the words became full and alive with meaning. Now, when they looked at the empty tomb Jesus’ death had been transformed into the promise of God’s reign. To remember meant to reinforce what they had heard earlier but not believed, not until they stood at the empty tomb and heard the word anew.

When the women remembered, they recognized the message of grace which had been encoded in many memories, they confessed their disbelief, and they turned and reoriented themselves to God in Christ Jesus.

To reorient is to turn away from all that destroys, harms, hurts and kills, and towards, in this case, the Lord of Life. For with the Risen Jesus, they are headed toward life and not ruin.

No longer would they fear promises that could be broken. Instead they would keep their eyes on Jesus whose word is truth. For now their memories of what Jesus had said and done was linked to God’s promise to bring life out of death. No longer would they be weighed down with questions of the presence of God, for God had acted decisively in raising Jesus from the dead. God would not leave them to despair. God was back! Instead God would lead them to life.

As they remembered and heard anew that God had raised Jesus from the dead, then all they had formerly been taught and known and encountered was reorganized into a single experience of resurrected life. To remember became a moment of having God in Christ revealed.

They could do no other than tell the news of the resurrection to the other disciples. And it didn’t matter that Peter was not able to quite grasp their first announcement. Because they now knew Jesus had risen from the dead, they also knew the world had changed, and they would intend to live as if the world was now new and different even if Peter and others might not recognize it at first. They would vow to live in the ways of promise and hope that Jesus had shown, trusting that God would work in God’s time to reveal this to the others.

That the world had changed meant that they would boldly live, believing that the lion does indeed lie down with the lamb, the poor and vulnerable will receive blessings, the lost will be found, that enemies will be loved, sins forgiven, and the hungry filled with good things. They vowed to live and trust in this way of God’s kingdom.