

Easter Meditation
Luke 24:1-12
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It's so trivial. I know it's trivial. But one of my favorite things in life comes every Sunday afternoon when, after a good day of work I come home, and enjoy Sunday dinner with my family, and then stretch out with my feet up on the couch, and open the *New York Times* magazine to the second-to-the-last page, and I do the Sunday crossword puzzle. Now there are two kinds of people in the world, crossword puzzle fans and, well, you other people. But even if you find yourself in the latter category you can imagine the feeling of vindication that comes with any sport when you've mastered the game: picturing the lay of the ball on the green ...predicting the strategic plays of competing NCAA teams ... figuring the play of the poker hand, not only your own hand but the whole table's. Such is my feeling of sweet victory every Sunday afternoon, between dinner and my requisite nap: the challenge of hints, that yield letters here and there, and growing shards of words that often make no sense at all until eventually – usually – an obscure or even obvious memory dawns on me, and the words fall into place. Not all at once or even linearly, but episodically, over time, eventually I will have solved the Sunday puzzle.

There is a puzzle of a graver kind that also appears in *The Times* magazine now and then. Whether or not you take *The Times*, you know the genre: the article is called “Diagnosis” – a story that features a medical mystery. A patient who presents with heart trouble, but who shows no signs of arrhythmia or rapid pulse ... or a patient who appears to have phantom pains that are not explained by every test that's run. The physicians are stumped because the data doesn't fit together – the pieces seem incongruous and unrelated. Until at last, at the end of the story, a doctor remembers – some obscure or maybe obvious piece, and suddenly all of it fits.

This unraveling of mystery, this piecing together of disconnected data, this retrieval of memory familiar or obscure: it is how our minds work every day. We make sense of disparate pieces by producing story lines, if you will; our brains strive to create meaningful connections using whatever data we have. We see a flock of geese flying north in March and even though the wind is still brisk

and 6 inches of snow have just fallen, we know the way the data is supposed to fit together and we trust it, that sooner or later, spring will come. We see a long trail of cars slowing down on the highway and if it's 5 p.m. we know that it's just time for rush hour, but if it's 3 in the morning we suspect there's either road repair or an accident in front of us. We see what we see and then our minds fill in the rest with what we know, or at least think we know, and remember.

It was like that for the women at the tomb that morning, with so many pieces of the story that they knew its meaning without a doubt. It was a routine visit to the grave, if visits to the tombs of our loved ones can ever be routine. He'd been their teacher, their rabbi, and they'd loved him. He was different than the others. Not so much scholarly as wise; not interested in his own authority, or the prestige afforded to anyone so learned in the law. It wasn't his nobility or honor, though he deferred to no one. No, it was this that made them follow him and cling to his every word: it was his single-mindedness. It was clear that what mattered to him most was God, and how to live in a way that pleased God. And it was so life-giving: to peel away the burden of the Law to the very core, so that everything flowed in synchronized beauty from that single spring-fed source. What does God desire? What pleases God? What glorifies God's Being? How do we best love God and neighbor – not just the rich ones or the beautiful ones or the righteous ones or the ones in our own clan, but all of our neighbors, maybe especially the ones society counted unproductive or even worthless. Like the foreigners, and the prostitutes, and the children, and the lepers, and the women, these women. Jesus had called them neighbor, and even family, even children of the God that he called Father. And these women, they loved him for it.

And the people in power, they hated him for it.

So the pieces, the pieces of the story fell into painful but sensible place for the women as they came to the tomb that day. Jesus had offended the religious leaders – not just by arguing with them; that they could take – but by undermining their authority. And Jesus had offended the politicians – not just by stirring up the crowds but by dismissing their power. Once Jesus had threatened the people at the top, they tried to quiet him ... and then they tried to

discredit him ... and then they tried to humiliate him. And when none of that worked, they had him killed. Those pieces, they all made sense, all the sense in the world.

When the women went to the tomb that morning, to anoint his body for burial, they went knowing how these pieces fit into the story ... with painful clarity.

But when they arrived at the tomb, other pieces came into the picture, pieces that didn't make sense at all. When they arrived at the tomb, they found the stone at the mouth of the cave already rolled away. And when they stooped down and went into the tomb, they did not find his body. And when they stood there, utterly perplexed, two men in brilliant clothes stood beside them, and they were terrified. None of it made sense anymore. Nothing fit this diagnosis anymore. None of it meshed with the story that they knew by heart and had come to accept. He was killed, he was dead, it was finished.

And then the men in dazzling clothes said to them: "Remember." Remember *all* the pieces. Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners. Remember how he told you that he must be crucified. And remember how he told you that on the third day, on the third day he would rise again. Remember.

And then the women, they remembered his words. They remembered the obscure and utterly obvious words that Jesus had told them. And they remembered how he'd pointed to the God who had made heaven and earth out of nothing ... how he'd told them of their God who had led them safely out of slavery in Egypt ... They remembered how he'd talked of God's great mercy, and redemption, and unchangeable love. They remembered. And all the pieces of the story fell into glorious place, and what had seemed an incongruous mystery was solved ... was solved in a way they had never imagined. In a way that amazed them.

This is how our minds work every day, in life and in faith: each piece falling into place, one piece at a time, until the mystery, the puzzle is solved.

Often, most of our lives, the pieces all make sense together. As children, our parents love us, and we have a place to live, and mostly horrible things don't happen to us, but then we discover that horrible things happen to other people around the world, or up the street, or maybe even, eventually, in our own home. We acquire pieces of data in life, bit by bit, and we are able to make sense of it. We learn the formulas of mathematics and of language, and how basic science works, and economics, more or less, and we make sense of it. We discover that there are things we can achieve if we put our minds to it, and other things we can't control, like the cancer that claims our loved one's body, or dementia that claims their mind, and even when we hate it, we can make sense of it. Piece by piece, bit by bit, we gain the data of life, and we are able to make sense of it.

We are not to be faulted for thinking we have all the pieces. We see that the world is filled with corruption, and it doesn't surprise us when another politician here or in a nation far away has cooked the books or stolen the election. We live with the reality of simmering racial tensions and memories of riots, and the rhetoric of the angry victim doesn't surprise us. We are not to be faulted for thinking we have the whole picture when we hear another story that the weather patterns have changed so radically that the greening of the spring has moved northward miles every year according to satellite pictures. We are not to be criticized for imagining we have the picture right when we hear that the Middle East is exploding in violence again. And maybe we're right. Maybe those are all the pieces there are to find.

But I, for one, wouldn't be surprised if there are still some pieces yet to emerge ... new data that does not mesh with the conclusions that we've reached. I wouldn't be surprised if something new breaks in, and the way our story fits doesn't quite work anymore. It may not be obvious at first, or perhaps for a very long time, what the new data means, or how it changes things. But bit by bit, it dawns on us, as piece after piece emerges that there are things we have forgotten along the way, obscure or obvious things, that must be kept in mind.

The memory of a noble political leader – of Lincoln, or Churchill, or Kennedy, and the miracle of free elections in the first time in ___ or ___ or ____ . The memory of Martin Luther King's dream, or apartheid's fall in South

Africa, and the power of the rhetoric of reconciliation. The memory of scientists discovering vaccines for smallpox and tuberculosis and engineers putting a man on the moon. The call of young people to the service in World War II or the Peace Corp in the 60s. The establishment of Israel as a nation and the peace accords with Egypt and Jordan. Piece after piece demands to be remembered, alongside everything else we know to be true.

After September 11, when we thought that terrorism had triumphed as the new reality, one of the editors of the Great Books Foundation pointed readers to a stunning poem by Wislawa Szymborska, Polish Nobel laureate, who has lived, as he put it, through the “previous century’s worst nightmares.” While the author does not mention faith per se, I find in it the same evidence of the pieces that surprise us, the same evidence that, though evil is still very much alive, there is a stronger power yet. Though it doesn’t make sense, there are pieces of reality that point to God’s insistent will that life will win and love will triumph. Pieces that we must, if we are honest, remember. Pieces that, once we remember them, hold a power that cannot be dismissed. She calls her poem “Reality Demands”:

Reality demands
that we also mention this:
Life goes on. ...

There’s a gas station
on a little square in Jericho,
and wet paint
on park benches in Bila Hora.
Letters fly back and forth between Pearl Harbor and Hastings,
a moving van passes
beneath the eye of the lion at Chaeronea,
and the blooming orchards near Verdun
cannot escape
that approaching atmospheric front.

There is so much of Everything

that Nothing is hidden quite nicely. ...

So much is always going on,
that it must be going on all over. ...

This terrifying world is not devoid of charms,
of the mornings
that make waking up worthwhile. ...

[And] on tragic mountain passes
the wind rips hats from unwitting heads
and we can't help
laughing at that.

What is it that you might have forgotten? What piece of life or memory has slipped away? The memory of a mother's love? The joy of a child's eyes, in wonder at the stars? The knowledge of forgiveness of a terrible wrong, forgiveness that you know you did not deserve? What do you need to remember?

Every Sunday, we are faced with a difficult puzzle, the puzzle that the women faced when they went to the tomb that Easter Sunday morning. The challenge of hints that do not fit with other pieces we already know. Growing bits of evidence that often make no sense at all until eventually – usually – an obscure or even obvious memory dawns on us, and a new reality falls into glorious place. Not all at once or even linearly, but episodically, over time, eventually, Sunday after Sunday, when we hear the story of unexpected life, and absurd redemption, and astonishing love ... Sunday after Sunday we remember that the pieces we have gathered are not all there is to know. Not all at once, or even linearly, but episodically, over time, if we let this data in, eventually we will see the way reality has always been. We will have solved the Sunday puzzle. And we will be amazed ... just amazed at how it turns out. Amen.