

Picking Up Pennies

Luke 24:1-12

I would guess that you came to church today already knowing—mostly—what the message of this day is. Most of us who have grown up hanging around the church or even in this largely Christian culture have heard the Easter story before—perhaps dozens of times. But here we are...with hopefulness, with optimism, perhaps out of loyalty to your family, or maybe you are here simply to hear a familiar story.

And that's a good thing. Whatever your reason is for being in church today, I'm glad you're here. If you feel this morning a little like you're observing a holiday that has a good color scheme and happy symbols, but whose origins are pretty much a mystery to you, I want to tell you that you that you're in good company. There are many of us who still aren't quite sure we've completely understood what Easter is about, or that it will make any difference once we've gotten home from brunch this afternoon, or when the alarm goes off at 6:00 tomorrow morning. Resurrection is a hard thing to understand...maybe impossible, really, for us to grasp fully.

So—how much harder for the people who made sense of those strange things happen without having *heard* the Easter story first! When the women went to the tomb that morning, they did not go with a song in their hearts. They went with their heads bowed over, their shoulders bent with grief. Their friend had died. Their hearts were heavy. They knew, most of all that morning, what a cruel place the world could be. The Easter story begins with their willingness to stay with their sadness. Because when they walked into the darkness of that tomb, they dared to enter what perhaps we all fear most: nothingness. Nothing. No thing. No body. Nothing. They had already dealt with the death of their friend; but this nothingness scared them even more. They were terrified, Luke tells us. So terrified that all they could do was lay down, their faces flat on the ground. Is there any more abject, defeated posture in the whole world?

“Don't you remember?” asked two angels who had appeared from nowhere. “Don't you remember that he told you he would rise again?” And it's the familiarity of that “don't you remember” phrase that catches me here. “Don't you remember” is a familiar phrase in houses where people live together—maybe especially spouses. And it has a favorite sister phrase, which is “I already told you...” In my house, mostly these phrases follow a question like: “What are we doing for dinner?” “Don't you remember?...I told you...” But they work just as well in response to other questions, like: what are we doing this weekend? Or when are your parents coming? Or what are we getting the kids for Christmas? “I already told you...Don't you remember...?”

And despite my usual impatience in these conversations, I know there's a good reason why they happen. We don't remember things—no matter how many times we're told—until somehow we've incorporated them into our own thinking, our own story. I remember what we're having for dinner, because I've thought about what I'm going to cook. My daughter doesn't remember that because it's not part of her story until we've eaten dinner.

Jesus told them what he could about resurrection before he died, and they listened; but they couldn't believe it—take it in—until they saw it for themselves. Until then, it was just someone else's story. They had no way to fit what he was saying into their own narrative. So when the women got to the tomb that morning, they did need to be reminded. They needed to be reminded of the story he had already told them, because it had not yet become part of *their* story. “Don't you remember?” the angels asked them. “He told you that he had to die, and that on the third day he would rise again...”

A story only becomes ours as we begin to tell it. Jesus' absence from the tomb became a story of resurrection—not a story of nothingness—as his friends and followers told it that way. When those women ran back from the tomb and found the other disciples and told them what they'd seen, they were practicing. When Peter went back to tell the others, after he'd gone to the tomb and seen for himself, he too was practicing the story, making sense of it as he talked. But even more than the re-telling, the story of Jesus' resurrection began to make sense, and became his followers' own story, when they started seeing signs of resurrection in their own lives.

And that's how it starts to make sense for us too, how it becomes part of *our* story, a story we'll remember when this day is over. Resurrection becomes real—we only begin to understand what resurrection means—when we *practice* it.

That might sound a little strange to you if you've always thought that the message of Easter is about what happens after you die. Easter does bring that comfort. The truth that even death couldn't extinguish the presence of God in the world ought to convince us that God's goodness is stronger than any death—even our own. But Easter is not only a promise that kicks in after death. In fact, the meaning of resurrection, I think, is not so much about life after death, as it is about how we live *before* we die.

It's about the lives we're living now, all of us. About what *this* day might look like, and the next day, and the one after that. It's about how we might live if we can trust—if we see in our own history—that beyond every one of the little deaths and losses you fear, there is more life—*good* life—to come. *That* makes a difference. It makes a difference not someday, but now. Today. Tomorrow, when you go back to work, or school; or you're driving the carpool, or getting on an airplane, or sitting alone in your kitchen.

I read an article once in which a number of theologically trained scholars were asked, “Why do you need to believe in resurrection?” Their responses might surprise you. They weren't about belief systems or philosophy or high-brow spirituality. Their answers were about what we all need, right in the middle of the concrete facts of real life.

I need the resurrection because my sister is sick and can't afford insurance.

I need the resurrection because I have told a weeping Haitian mother, 'No, I can't take your son home with me.'

I need the resurrection because I've exploded in rage at my children and watched their tiny faces cloud with hurt.

I need the resurrection because it promises that in the end all wrongs are made right; that death loses, that hope triumphs, and that life and love prevail. Always.

You know how often we see pennies lying on the street or the sidewalk? Once they fall out of a pocket, we don't even bother to bend down and pick them up. They have so little value, that they seem not even worth the effort to retrieve them. When you go into a store, sometimes you see a little bowl of pennies at the cash register for anyone to help themselves to if they need to make the right change. Pennies have so little value, that we don't even worry that they might get stolen. Who would bother stealing pennies?

A couple of years ago, children in Canada gathered in a campaign called "We Create Change". All across the country, they collected and saved pennies for a year. When they were done, their collection weighed more than 64 elephants. It took up the space of five empty Boeing 747's. But together they raised \$1.4 million to be used for providing access to water in developing countries. For a year, every penny mattered, even the dullest copper coins that had been walked on and driven over and scratched up until they were barely recognizable. Even the most wrecked penny had value, because no matter how it bedraggled it looked or how long it had been lying on the ground, it could become part of something bigger than itself.

And maybe that's what the story of resurrection is about: the possibility of new life, a new beginning, even in those moments when we feel as worthless and run over as a penny lying in the middle of the street. No matter what has put you there: the humiliation of looking for work when you've been turned down many times before. The embarrassment of asking for help—again. Sometimes it's about admitting that you have a habit or an addiction that won't let you go and that you just can't fix yourself. Or maybe it's simply about being at a point in your life when many of your friends are gone, and you just don't have enough energy left in your body to offer much to the world. We all feel it from time to time—like the little boy who stared down one night at his homework that wouldn't get done easily and said, "I wish my math was done and that I was married and dead."

Life has a way of beating us down until we feel, sometimes, like one of those pennies on the sidewalk that people might as well just walk over. If you have ever felt like that, or even close to that, Easter is for you. Because the message of Easter is that to God, every penny still has life in it. *Every* penny is worth picking up. The story of Easter is that there is no life that is so spent, or worn out, or used up—or even *dead*—that it cannot be resurrected, that it cannot contribute to something big, something important.

So make resurrection *your* story. Practice it. Notice its echo in your own life. And then tell the story—to yourself and to someone else: the story of how you too were brought to life and hope after you thought those things were gone forever.

You have a penny taped in your bulletin this morning. You could put it in the offering plate, and if you do, it will be added to a collection where every cent matters to help this church do good work. But I hope you won't do that with *this* penny. I hope you'll carry this penny around with you for a while, and let it remind you to practice resurrection. Practice remembering--and maybe even saying out loud--the ways that Easter—new life, re-found hope—is part of your story. And

then, practice being part of someone else's resurrection story. Bend down and pay attention to another life that might have been feeling like a penny that has been lying on the street or next to a cash register for way too long.

Wendell Berry may have been the first to coin the phrase "practice resurrection". He wrote it in his poem called *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*.

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.*

...

*Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
even though you have considered all the facts.*

...

Practice resurrection.

And pick up pennies.