Easter II
Cycle C, 4.28.19
Acts 5:12-16/Revelation 1:9-13,17-19/
John 20:19-31

OPEN THE DOOR OF THE PAINFUL PAST;
LET IN THE HEALING LIGHT

There are times in our lives where the only thing that can help get us through is our faith in God. You may remember the tragic bombing at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City many years ago. I recall hearing the words of a rescue worker in a television interview who said: When I get home at night my wife is there and she helps me get through the tragic things I faced during the day at work. If it weren’t for her I don’t know what I’d do. A firefighter, looking worn and depleted, said in another interview: If I really think about what I’m seeing as I’m pushing through the rubble, I can’t do my job. Sometimes I’ll see a part of a body and I’ll start to break down, but then I have to pull down a door and block it out so I can go on.

...pull down a door so I can go on.

Sometimes the things we face in life are so difficult that the memory alone brings back all the hurt feelings, all the pains of mind and heart, all the disaster and horror -- and it makes us relive the tragedy all over again. So we block out the memory and try to leave it in the past. We tuck away in a hidden corner those things that are too much to bear. I experienced that when a dear friend of mine died. I got to his apartment just as the coroner and the rescue squad were removing his body from the building. I gently touched his covered foot as the stretcher passed by me and prayed Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want... Even though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no evil, for you are at my side...” The gray skies overhead painted a fitting backdrop for the tears that slowly fell down the faces of his friends who stood in silent vigil. I’ve tried not to replay that painful memory too often in my mind, that scene of final encounter -- those last moments as they took my friend’s body away. For now I prefer to keep it buried away and protect myself against the cruelty and pain that a loved one’s death brings.

When the harsh truth can’t be faced easily or comfortably, our inner self respects the struggle and shrouds the memory with a protective layer so that it will only surface when we can handle it, when we can bear the truth and face the wound. Many women, in particular, know this experience of repressed memory. Some have been abused or molested in childhood -- innocent victims of incest or mistreatment by adults who should have been protectors, not perpetrators. These women and sometimes men have lived, are living, for years with a painful memory that aches to be shared, but that cannot surface because the shock would be too devastating. Some are lucky enough to find that listening ear of a counselor or a priest or parish staff member, an understanding spouse, a trusted relative or compassionate
neighbor, another man or woman who has
gone through a similar ordeal. Then the
truth can be told; the memory healed. But
for many that opportunity never comes and
the secret sits like a dumpster at the edge
of the property, always looming in the
background, unnoticed but filled with things
that are broken, the refuse of life.

The Gospel of this octave of Easter,
as we continue to celebrate the joy of
resurrection, stands in marked contrast to
the experience of a memory pushed aside.
Here is the scene of Jesus who enters
through the locked doors and stands in the
fearful shadows. In the very midst of weary
bodies huddled together for support and
comfort, in the face of devastating
memories that the eleven disciples were
trying to forget and would rather leave
behind, the Risen Lord appears plainly
before their eyes. He shows them his hands
and his side. He bids them to look at his
wounds, the marks of the nails and the
lance. Even, as with Thomas, to touch.
What they ran from a few days before, they
were now invited to witness again. The
Eleven now see unveiled the place of his
pain, the suffering Jesus bore for them and
for you and me. Not only do they see, but
John’s gospel reports: At the sight of the
Lord the disciples rejoiced. Suddenly, what
was a memory to be forgotten, a noise to
be drowned out, becomes a springboard for
celebration, a cause of healing and
forgiveness and peace.

The story of the famous fifth century
conversion of St. Augustine is just such an
example. He wrote about it in a book called
the Confessions which tell of his journey
from childhood through conversion to
Christianity when he was thirty-two years
old. His story is compelling: a scholarly
youth, an intense yet complex relationship
with his devout mother, his early peer-
driven “crimes,” his ambivalent attachment
to women, including the lower-class
mistress who bore his son, a zealous pursuit
of life’s meaning through affiliation with a
heretical religious sect, his scrutiny of the
popular philosophy of his day and, finally,
his exploration and conversion to
Christianity.

Always the probing restless thinker, like
Thomas in today’s gospel, Augustine sifts
through his personal history to find there
the insistent action of God drawing him
closer through events that, while they were
happening, seemed to have little to do with
divine presence. For Augustine, memory
isn’t photographic recall; it’s a creative and
instructive undertaking. He comes to know
and love God, not by avoiding the painful
past, but by seeing that God was with him
in all the particulars of his personal history.
Even at those times when God seemed
furthest away.
In order to come to that moment of conversion and healing, Augustine had to move from his attitude of pride and self-centered living, and gradually embrace a posture of humility and God-centeredness. As a boy Augustine was motivated by a grasping ambition to possess wealth, status, love, even spiritual wisdom. His gradual conversion involved a learning to let go, to become a recipient, to cease using “the beautiful things of this world” for his own selfish purposes. Augustine redirects his desire to the source of beauty, God.

As he remembered, his story was able to be drawn into the overarching story of Christianity in whose center stands Jesus -- the one who gains his life by losing it, who empties himself to become filled with the life of God. Memory, illumined by faith, draws the little story of Augustine, with all its pains and its wanderings, into the great story of Jesus. Our memories, illumined by faith in the Risen Lord, can become places of peace and healing, of forgiveness and love. Then, we won’t only be thankful for being rescued from the past, but we will be thankful precisely for the past. For, from it, comes our present life -- redeemed and renewed.

There is a power at work in the resurrection that can overcome fear and defeat death, that can stand up to the forces of evil and bring courage to the fainthearted. That’s something that we desperately need. Without the power of the Risen Lord, how can we keep hope alive in the face of struggles? How can we look into our own deepest wounds and trust that Christ will bring us healing? How can we share faith with our children and grandchildren in our world that’s caught up in easy answers, isolated communities and unforgiving hearts? We need the power that comes from faith, the power that will unleash the peace of Christ. With Thomas and the fearful disciples, may the Risen Lord set us free from any fear or anxiety, any doubt or dismay, and empower us to be bearers of hope and new life.

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