

Easter Sunday of the Lord's Resurrection – April 21, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30 & 11:00am Masses – 1,075 words

Our memories can be quite weak. It's not uncommon for an older person to exclaim that he has forgotten more in his life than a younger person has learned! We have forgotten many things from our youth; we will forget many more. We do learn new things all the time, of course, and it seems like we have an unlimited capacity for knowledge; yet it often also seems that something has to give, and the new takes the place of the old. Yes, there are those more powerful memories that we feel we can never forget; indeed, we often try to pass those memories on. But then we worry that the next generation may forget them. Memory is a feeble thing.

But memory was precisely what Mary Magdalene and the disciples had to rely upon in order to begin to comprehend the resurrection.¹ Christ told them everything in advance in very clear terms. Those memories, however, were obscured by their grief and bewilderment. We could say they were also hindered by their hardness of heart, their slowness to grasp fully who Jesus was and how he intended to accomplish his work of redemption. The shock of finding the empty tomb before seeing Jesus risen was necessary to begin jolting them out of their confusion and obscurity. Then the memories could start to rise to the surface and make sense.

Thus, as we heard in the gospel of the Easter Vigil, from Luke, the two men in dazzling garments – the angels of the resurrection – told Mary and the other women: “He is not here, but he has been raised. *Remember* what he said to you...” Then it added, “And they remembered his words. Then they returned from the tomb and announced all these things to the eleven...” From there we arrive at the scene in today's gospel, where Peter and John are racing. They came to believe what the women had said, but it says they still did not yet understand. They yet had to work through their memories and make all the connections. And they would.

I mentioned that we sometimes fear that the powerful moments we record in the annals of our minds might be forgotten by subsequent generations. That is not what happened in Japan.² St. Francis Xavier brought the Christian faith there in 1549, and other Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries continued his work until about the mid-17th century. But then, through a series of astonishingly brutal government persecutions, the Church was all but eradicated in Japan – or so it seemed. When French priests from the Foreign Missions Society of Paris finally gained entrance into the country in the mid-19th century, they made an astonishing discovery.

The date was March 17, 1865, and the location was Nagasaki. Fifteen “hidden Christians” revealed themselves to one of the priests and assured him there were some 50,000 more of their kind. They remembered the prayers that the missionaries had taught, handing them down through the generations. They secretly baptized their children. And they also taught them what to look for, on some future day: that men might arrive anew who were celibate, who venerated the Blessed Virgin Mary, and who heeded the authority of the Pope. That day arrived; in these French missionaries, their hopeful memories were now realized in the flesh.

The story of the resurrection of the Church in Japan is as powerful as it is remarkable. For we know how feeble memory is – yet those impressive souls preserved the memory for some 300 years. That has not happened everywhere; we know well the need for a “new evangelization”, for so many have lost the memory of the Lord – or perhaps not totally lost it, but have grown hard of heart and slow to believe. Look what happened in France – the land of incredible saints and magnificent Cathedrals, but where, in the past year, over 1,000 churches have been vandalized,

¹ I am grateful for the inspiration given on the theme of memory in the reflections of Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P. in his book *To Praise, To Bless, To Preach*, vol. C (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), pp. 67-68.

² A summary of the history of the Catholic Church in Japan is given in the entry “Japan” of the *Old Catholic Encyclopedia*, accessible online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen>.

with little notice given in the press. Then the “jewel” burns – how awful it was to see Notre-Dame in flames – and the resurrection begins. The touching prayer vigils and generous financial response suggest that the memories are indeed surfacing anew.

But does our faith really depend only on memory? At the Last Supper, Christ said, “Do this in memory of me”. The angels did not reveal anything new to the women, but appealed to their memory. Peter harkens to memory in his powerful preaching in the first reading. An initial answer would seem to be “yes”. But let’s go back to Christ’s command, “Do this in memory of me”: that very action also brings us face-to-face with the Lord! He becomes really and truly present in our midst when the priest takes the bread and wine and heeds his command. We have a true encounter, not with one who is dead and whom we merely remember, but with one who is alive forevermore and comes among us in a most intimate way.

Memory – yes. But also encounter! We must learn our faith and nurture the memory of it! But those memories only truly come alive, achieving their full sense, when we devoutly worship Christ in the Eucharist and worthily receive him. Then we have a life-giving meeting with the Risen Lord; indeed, communion with him. The Christians in Japan preserved the memory in a minimal way; it was a miracle of grace that they held on for as long as they did! So many others have not been as successful. I warmly invite those who may not be attending Mass every Sunday and Holy Day to begin doing so. We need that regular encounter with the Risen Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Otherwise, we, too, risk becoming hard of heart and drifting away.

Seeing the empty tomb was the initial jolt that Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, and the others needed. But then they would ultimately see the Risen Christ. They would come to know him in the breaking of the bread. They would then go out and hand on what they had received, inviting others also to the personal encounter with the Lord – not someone who ceased to exist sometime before, but who was truly alive and came to them even now. May our worship this Easter Sunday strengthen us all and lead us to a more faithful following of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ. See what he suffered to save us – see how much he loves us. A happy Easter to you all!