

SERMON
The Third Sunday of Easter - April 15, 2018
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it...History is literally present in all that we do.

James Baldwin

This quote from James Baldwin, writ large on the walls of the African American Museum in Washington, DC, cautions and graces us. “The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it...History is literally present in all that we do.” I suppose this is why the stories that we carry with us are so important. The ones we receive from our families, our culture, our faith—and also the ones we don’t know about but carry in our very bones—our DNA, the experiences of our parents and grandparents—even the stories they never told us about. All these are somehow carried within in and according to Baldwin, we “are unconsciously controlled by it.” Our histories are a great gift. Don’t you wish you had taken the time to ask more questions when your parents and grandparents were around to share them with you.

It is said that Martha Stewart’s celebrity success as sort of a “television coach” for the art of homemaking, is because there are many of us in my generation and the next, who didn’t learn those basic skills about cooking and decorating or even how to make a bed correctly. (Whatever that means.) These basic life-skilled didn’t get passed down the way they did a hundred or two hundred years ago. There’s a movie from the early 90’s that depicts these social changes in the culture of this country. *Avalon*. It’s the story of brothers William and Hyman who came to this country from eastern Russia near Kiev around 1912—and were joined by their other brother Sam in 1914. The three worked to save enough money to send for the rest of the family and in 1922 their parents and other brothers and sisters arrived and settled with the others in Baltimore. They had a

wallpaper-hanging business. They married and had children. The movie is rooted in the immigrant experience and the family's assimilation into American life. Beginning with the WWI era, the movie then focuses on the period after WWII when the cousins and their families move to the suburbs and join country clubs. The connecting image I remember most is the annual Thanksgiving dinner table where we track the social advancement of the family—while at the same time, the cultural breakdown takes center stage. We see the family gathering around the table. There's food and laughter and arguments and children. It's alive and colorful. At the end of the story there is no Thanksgiving dinner table. Everyone is too busy. Too self-absorbed. Isolated. An old man sits in front of a tv eating alone. It is Thanksgiving. His great grandson is brought in for a visit. The child doesn't seem to know who the old man is. By the end of the story there seems to be few smiles, no laughter. Just busy people going through the routines and motions of life. I fear, when we lose the stories of our origins we also lose the source and ground which gives meaning and depth and joy to life itself.

Many of us don't know much about our grandparents—or even our parents. Just imagine what we have lost in 100 years. One year for All Saints Sunday I asked the children to include on cards, for our prayers, the names of their grandparents. They didn't know their names. Just Grandma, or Nanna, or Pops. I discovered that only a few even knew their parents' names.

As we prepare for the centennial of Epiphany Chapel I'm learning just how difficult it is to put together the names and dates of our own grandfathers and parents. Thinking on these things, I've counted up. If you count three generations in 100 years—it means that there are only about 60 generations between us and Jesus of Nazareth. (If I've done the math right.) 100 into 2000, times 3 equals 60 generations. Imagine what we have lost. This is what our gospels try to recover. Jesus is not some young man who died alone on a

cross in a distant land—too long ago to remember. Just as our own histories are personal, so it is, we hope, that our faith is personal, too. Recalling Baldwin’s conviction—We hope, that we carry Jesus within us—are shaped, consciously and unconsciously by him. We trust that Jesus is literally present in all that we do. It’s what our gospels and our liturgy and our faith community life is here for.

For some, the history of our faith seems lost. For you who gather around this table and bring your children, it is not lost. Matthew and Mark and Luke and John provide the family stories and the Church sets the table. This is what today’s Gospel lesson is all about. We are listening to what Luke has to say about Jesus. The story he tells is about the experience the disciples had after Jesus had died. Some had gone to the garden and found Jesus’ body missing. A few were on their way to Emmaus where they would meet up with the others. A stranger had come along and walked with them and opened up the scriptures to them and explained the meaning of Jesus’ death — “the big picture,” so to speak. Then, as we read today, while they were telling the others about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” Like the “Doubting Thomas” story in the Gospel of John, they were frightened and thought they saw a ghost. But Jesus offered his hands and feet, “Touch me and see.” And then he said he was hungry. And they ate a meal together. Again he explained the meaning of his death, opened up the scriptures to them, promised to give them the power of God to guide them, and commissioned them to offer forgiveness and renewal to the world. “Touch and see. Share this meal. And then go out!”

There are volumes and libraries of books about the meaning of the Communion the Church offers with Jesus. There are careful studies about the “words of institution” as they are called, the words we remember over the bread and wine—

Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to his friends and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

As supper was ending, Jesus took the cup of wine, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them and said: Drink this, all of you. This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is poured out for you and for all for the forgiveness of sine. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.

Whatever else these words may mean, what I hear after all these years is an insistence that we remember him as real. A real man. "This is by body. This is my blood." I am not a ghost. Not a figment of your imagination. Real flesh and blood. Who lived as we live and died as we also die. If we lose this, we lose everything. The person of Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, is so vivid, his individual characteristics are so lively and unmistakable, he stands out so distinctively himself and not anyone else, that the stories leave us with the intense impression of a real man, dealing with real people, in actual historical situations. Some religions are built around mythological figures—Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Adonis, Dionysus. Mithra was a mythical figure, around whose legends and rituals a religion developed so powerful that, for a time, in the third century, it threatened to outdo Christianity. But Jesus was a man insist the Gospels, who lived and died, a real man, dealing with real people, in a real time and place. A man who left a real and lasting mission for those whom he loved, and those who loved him. (H.E. Fosdick)

Like trying to find out more on ANCESTRY.COM, scholars have turned to history books, and found Josephus, the Jewish historian, born in Jerusalem in about 37 AD. He narrowly missed being Jesus' contemporary. In two passages in his *Antiquities*, he mentions Jesus.

In the first, it is believed that his work has been expanded upon. But still, Josephus tells us that Jesus came into prominence about the time a popular uprising opposing Pilate's attempt to use temple revenues to improve Jerusalem's water supply. That Jesus was a "wise man," a "doer of wonderful works," that when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us had condemned him to the cross, those who loved him at the first ceased not to love him," and that "the people, these Christians (as Josephus was first to call them), are not extinct even now." The second passage from Josephus appears so casually and naturally in Josephus' narrative that there is no reason to suspect its authenticity: "Ananias called a Sanhedrin together, brought before it James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others...and he caused them to be stoned." (Fosdick) Don't we wish there were more references in early historical writings—but the point is, the ministry and death of Jesus in Palestine is real. And because he is real, in our baptized selves, we pray that "we carry Him within us, are unconsciously controlled by Him...And that He is literally present in all that we do."

As we prepare for the centennial celebration of this Chapel, I've been thinking and saying to you and to myself—"history is always personal." Let's remember to make our centennial personal. During WWI the U.S. mobilized over 4 million military personnel and suffered 110,000 deaths, including about 45,000 who died from Influenza. Each person had a story. Each person had a family back home. Every story, for every family, is personal. *Keeping the faith* now means taking the time to get personal. To touch and to be touched. To remember and to experience. In the pews are cards and pens. You are invited to share the names of family members who lived during WWI. Those who were deployed. Those who were home. *Keeping the faith* means doing the remembering—remembering those who fought and those who supported them. On June 3 we will share these stories, through records and pictures many of which are available through online

