[Isaiah 43:16-21](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=122#hebrew_reading)

[Psalm 126](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=122#psalm_reading)

[Philippians 3:4b-14](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=122#epistle_reading)

[John 12:1-8](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=122#gospel_reading)

LIVING ON THE PLAINS Sermon for April 7, 2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

I heard a good joke the other day.

A few old [couples](http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/couple-jokes) used to get together to talk about [life](http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/life-jokes) and to have a good time. One day one of the men, Harry, started talking about this fantastic [restaurant](http://5jokesaday.com/content/restaurant-jokes) he went to the other [night](http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/night-jokes) with his [wife](http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/wife-jokes). “Really?" one of the other men said, “what’s it [called](http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/call-jokes)?” After thinking for a few seconds, Harry said, “What are those good smelling [**flowers**](http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/flower-jokes)called again? You know, the red ones?" “Do you mean a rose?” the other man answered. “Yes, that’s it," Harry exclaimed. Then looking over at his [wife](http://www.5jokesaday.com/content/wife-jokes) he said, “Rose, what’s that restaurant we went to the other night?"

The memory is a strange thing, isn't it? One of the illustrations I like to use of the mysterious nature of the memory is to throw out a single line from some song to someone, and ask them to take it from there. What's truly amazing is how often people are able to remember all the rest of the lyrics or at least a pretty good portion of them, even if they haven't heard the song in decades. If I say, Don't be cruel” to almost anyone here, I'd bet they could go on to say: to a heart that's true. I don't want no other love, Baby it's just you I'm thinking of.”

Or if I were to say, “You don't know how many times I've wished that I had told you,” a bet most everyone here could then say:

You don't know how many times
I've wished that I could hold you
You don't know how many times

I've wished that I could
Mold you into someone who could
Cherish me as much as I cherish you

And so on and on and on. I would be willing to bet good money that almost everyone has literally thousands of song lyrics sitting in some dusty old memory closet just waiting for something to trigger them back to life, and that's without ever having tried to “commit them to memory” Somehow or other they just find their way there.

And of course we're all familiar with short-term forgetfulness, a phenomenon that is alleged to become more frequent as we move up in years. I know it isn't unusual for me to step into the pantry for something and then stare blankly at the shelves trying to remember what it is. Or I've gone to the store to get something in particular, and once there I fill up a shopping basket, check out at the register, and on the way back to the car I remember I hadn't got the very thing I went there for in the first place. I've even climbed in bed and then lain there trying to remember whether I'd brushed my teeth!

I'm sure you can probably all contribute your own examples.

I think this fallibility of human memory is one of the things Jesus was most worried about. He had a very limited amount of time to make an impression on his followers, an impression that would be strong enough to motivate them for their entire lives, an impression that would remain as a living reality in their lives, even after he was gone.

But the simple human reality is that the passage of time, even when it doesn't completely erase important memories, tends to diminish their force. Sometimes that diminishment consists in letting the important elements of the memory recede into the background, leaving only a few elements and perhaps a sort of glow behind.

After many years of not wanting to read novels or fiction of any kind, in the fairly recent past I kind of picked up the bug again, so I've been looking for fiction to read, and that includes re-reading books that I'd read and enjoyed in the past. It so happens one of those was a trilogy of science fiction novels by an author named Isaac Asimov called The Foundation Trilogy. I must have been in my early to mid-teens when I originally read them, and I was really caught up in them at the time. I never read them after that, but what's funny is that over all the years since then, I've maintained this attitude of respect for how deep and meaningful the books were, and what a step forward in my own intellectual maturity they had provided. Whenever I heard the name Isaac Asimov mentioned over the decades, I also thought of him as one of ***my***authors, so to speak, one who really had significance in my life.

So a couple of months back, it occurred to me that it might be interesting to go back and read The Foundation Trilogy again, so I sent away for a copy, all three books in a single volume.

Well, by now you will probably have guessed that, when I started reading the books, I did not remember a single thing that happened. Except for the name of one of the two leading characters and the gender of the other, I did not remember anything at all. It was exactly like reading the books the first time, as far as knowing what happened next in the plot. I was surprised in all the places I had originally been surprised, worried where I had been worried, and exhilarated when the tensions were resolved, just like I was fifty-odd years ago.

Or sometimes that diminishment works by a sort of dissociation. We all know what it's like to make a firm and genuine resolution on January 1, to cut back on carbohydrates, say, or to exercise for thirty minutes a day. And we all know what it's like on March 1. It's not that we've forgotten the resolution, it's that we've somehow dissociated who we are now from who we were then.

I think our Gospel passage for this morning shows us how very aware Jesus was about this human tendency, about the very fragile hold that events of the past have on us, when the only connection we have to them is through our memory.

What we find is Jesus sitting down for a meal with some of His disciples and some old friends. It was six days before the Passover, John informs us. And the very next day Jesus would make his final entrance into Jerusalem, with the crowds calling out Hosanna and waving their palm branches, the occasion we'll soon be celebrating ourselves on Palm Sunday.

So here are at the very end of Jesus's ministry, only days away from the end of His life, and Jesus is sitting down to dinner with a small group of His closest friends. And John specifically tells us that one of those friends was Lazarus! Lazarus! The man Jesus had raised from the dead not long before!

Try to imagine that! You’re sitting down at an intimate dinner party, and one of the people you're eating with had recently been raised from the dead. And one of the others was the person who raised that individual from the dead! And all the others had been witnesses to that same event, all the people there had seen perhaps the most extraordinary thing that had ever happened: a person who had been dead for three days was brought back to life. And here he was now, smiling and eating and probably having a glass of wine.

Even if your reaction might not have been quite so dramatic as Mary's was, when she took a container of expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus’s head, still, wouldn't you be affected by some sense of the marvel and the privilege and the unthinkable mystery of the occasion? Even if you didn't anoint the occasion with perfume, wouldn't you at least anoint it with your own wonder and respectful awe?

And yet Judas instead chides the woman for wasting money, wasting it by paying respect to the miracle worker, the one who had fed the 5000, walked on water, and even raised from the dead the man who was sitting right there with them.

John tells us that it was Judas who raised the objection to this waste of good money, but both Matthew and Mark, in their accounts of the same incident, say that there were several of the disciples who were upset. And I think that's more likely, because when Jesus teaches a lesson based on what's just happened, He uses the plural form of 'you.' “You,” he says, speaking to all of them, not just Judas, “you will always have the poor among you, but I am only here for this one brief moment.”

Would that one brief moment – the three short years of His earthly ministry – would that be enough? If they could not even remember that He was the unfathomable Son of God for a few days, could they possibly remember it for a lifetime?

About ten or twelve days later, after the resurrection, Jesus – now like Lazarus having risen from the dead – appears to Thomas, the disciple who had doubted that Jesus was really again alive, and has Thomas touch the very wounds of the crucifixion. And after Thomas has proclaimed His belief, Jesus says, “You've believed because you've seen these things with your own eyes. But blessed are those who will never see them, and yet believe.”

Most lives tend to consist of a few peaks, a few valleys, and a lot of flat plains. That's just reality. And human reality is that the experiences of both the valleys and the peaks tend to diminish and even disappear as we wander along the plains.

This was the problem for Christ then, and it remains the problem for Christ today.

When Jesus came down with James and John and Peter from the mount of transfiguration, He told them to keep quiet about their experience for the time being. The implication was that there would come a time when they would want to tell others about it, and to remind themselves of it. To keep the memory alive that for a few brief moments, Jesus had truly revealed to them His full divinity. That would be something they would want to remember again and again, and tell others about again and again.

That's exactly what we do here in church every Sunday, and in other churches all over the world, and that's why we do it. We tell the same old story over and over again, because if we don't, being human, we'll forget. We may not forget a few of the names, but we'll forget the fullness of the experience. The real tragedy of people not attending church is that they will gradually become dissociated from the richness and the detail and the vibrancy and the full reality of who Christ is, as recorded in the Gospel.

That's why in the season of Lent, as in other seasons of the Church year, we call to mind a particular season of Christ's own life, and we tell each other the story of that season over and over again. We tell about Mary anointing Jesus with a perfume whose aroma filled the house; we tell about Him riding a donkey into Jerusalem while people placed palm leaves on the ground in front of Him; we tell about Him clearing the Temple, being arrested in the Garden, standing alone and yet unafraid before Pontius Pilate; of His forgiveness as he was tortured and then brought to the Cross; and finally of His death and resurrection.

It's for our sake that we tell and retell all these stories. For the sake of our own memories and motivation. So that the living Son of God may, for a while at least, once again become a reality in our lives, through the miracle of memory.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is that you use the words of this morning's message, and all the other words we will read and hear during this Lenten season, use them as nourishment for our memory, our memory of Jesus, Your only begotten Child and our Lord and Savior, and we offer this prayer in His name.