A faith that looks to the future

Ever since the women at the tomb learned that Jesus was “going ahead,” we’ve been trying to catch up.

by Peter W. Marty in the June 5, 2019 issue

Photo by Linh Nguyen

Looking back at one’s high school yearbook is an amusing exercise. Seeing the dated hairstyles, the gawky kids in science club photos, and the barely-out-of-college teachers who seemed like sages at the time remind us how much we’ve changed. The personal notes penned by classmates suggest that many felt they were at the top of the world. Twelve years of schooling had refined our personalities, values, and preferences in ways that would carry us for the rest of our lives.

Mark Twain’s famous quip, “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around; but when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years,” hints at our

broader difficulty of seeing ahead clearly. Most of us struggle to imagine how we will change.

Harvard psychologist Daniel T. Gilbert and two colleagues, Jordi Quoidbach and Timothy D. Wilson, discovered these tendencies through research involving more than 19,000 people (*Science Magazine*, January 2013). Their work reveals that people of all ages grossly underestimate the extent to which they will change in the future. They end up believing that "who they are today is pretty much who they will be tomorrow, despite the fact that it isn't who they were yesterday." Even though we know we have changed a lot in the past, we don't expect to change in the future.

Two possible reasons surfaced for this behavior. First, most people have confidence in their own wonderfulness and feel quite good about themselves. Second, the constructive process of looking forward is more strenuous than the reconstructive process of looking backward. Imagining what is yet to unfold is much more difficult than remembering the past.

I think about these matters as I contemplate how we understand the Bible. If we assume the Bible is all about the past—ancient words and revelations waiting to be deciphered—we're missing something. The Bible is about the future, even when that future is challenging to discern. Ever since the women at the tomb learned that Jesus was "going ahead of [them] to Galilee," we've been trying to catch up. First-century believers had a habit of telling Jesus that Abraham said this and Moses said that. Jesus liked to reply, "But I say unto you . . ." which was a redirection of thinking to a new future where God's greatest work still awaits us.

Religion often carries nostalgic overtones. We can get comfortable speaking in the past tense. Friends learn about our faith preferences through the prism of what we remember from earlier church experiences.

But when the disciples on the road to Emmaus devoted themselves to looking backward, the resurrected Lord kept sending them forward. They eventually caught on to this trajectory, but initially they were like two people rowing a boat: they were backing into the future, more impressed with the wake they left behind. Fundamentalism, in its most rigid form, attempts to retrieve and preserve the past, however imagined that past might be.

Deeply hope-filled people put their money on tomorrow. They "forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3:13). They trust, in the words of

poet E. E. Cummings, that “tomorrow is [their] permanent address.”

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