



“No More Business as Usual”
Scripture – John 20:19-22
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 19, 2020

How much longer? That is the question on everyone’s mind, isn’t it? How much longer will this plague last? How much longer before it is safe to leave our homes? How much longer before people will be ready to sit next to one another in a stadium or a concert hall or a restaurant or a sanctuary? How much longer before people remove their face masks, reduce the six foot distance from one another, and resume shaking hands?

How much longer is not the only question on people’s minds. How many more will die? How many businesses will fail? How many families will be financially crippled?

And then there is the question of what next? Many of our habits and routines will eventually reestablish themselves, but what new practices and initiatives will emerge? Not everything will simply revert to the way it was before this global pandemic delivered its brutal blow. I hope we do not totally squander this crisis. We will be quick to calculate the many losses we have suffered; I pray we will also be alert for new possibilities that present themselves.

This global pandemic has jolted many people into reflecting about life in ways they have not done in a while – if ever. This deadly disease has torn open the suit of armor many imagined they were wearing and confronted them with the fragility of life. Some are facing questions they successfully tamped down in the past. Why do I divide the world up in simplistic categories of us and them? How will I raise my children in this dangerous and unpredictable world? Why do I continue to work at a job that makes me ill? Is wealth really more valuable than time? What prevents me from making a deeper commitment to following the way of Jesus? Who is my neighbor?

To set the stage for the lectionary gospel reading on the second Sunday of Easter, we backtrack to last Sunday. You remember that at the break of dawn on the Sunday following the crucifixion women went to the tomb of Jesus only to find that the stone covering its entrance had been rolled away and Jesus had risen from the dead. For today’s passage, we move the clock ahead a mere 12 hours, from Easter morning to Easter evening. We discover the disciples hiding behind doors that are bolted shut. The disciples are sheltering in place because they are anxious and afraid. Hmm, sound familiar? Only their unease does not stem from a deadly disease. They fear those who silenced Jesus because they may have a list that includes their names.

As they huddle together, afraid that death may come knocking, suddenly Jesus appears in their midst. The disciples are speechless. Did they recognize him immediately? The text is unclear, but none of them speaks until Jesus says, “Peace be with you” and shows them the wounds in his hands and side. Once they see his wounds, they erupt in celebration. Jesus has been raised!

When the cheering subsides, Jesus speaks again. He says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus commissions them to carry on the work he has initiated.

I fear that too many Christians act as if the resurrection of Jesus is the end of the story. Jesus died and was raised from the dead and after our time on earth runs out, we too will have new life in God’s everlasting kingdom. I believe that is true. However, as today’s passage makes clear, Jesus appeared to his followers not only for the sake of confirming that there is another dimension of existence beyond this world, but to commission his followers to carry on his work. That means the resurrection is not something we are to simply look forward to later. Rather, we are to partner with God *now* in the work of resurrection. We are to bring new life to seemingly dead situations. That is how God transforms, resurrects, and gives birth to new life. Through us.

Shannon Kershner, the senior pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells of meeting Sherry, a woman trapped in an abusive relationship. Sherry was terrified because she figured that any time this man might go out of control and kill her. But one day Sherry noticed that the name of the pastor on the church sign was a woman. She sat down with the pastor and said she wanted to know what a female minister might say about her situation. Would the minister quote scriptures stating that she must stay in the marriage and bear her cross of abuse?

Instead, the minister told her she was a person of worth and that God did not want her to be abused. The minister gave Sherry a book, the number of the domestic violence hotline, and asked her to call the next day to let her know whether or not she would leave him.

But as they prayed, the minister noticed Sherry’s defeated posture, and realized she had already decided. Sherry could not envision a different future. The minister inspected Sherry’s eyes for a glimmer of hope, but all she could see was despair. Sherry never called.

Two years after the minister’s encounter with Sherry, she received a call from another woman who was terrified and trying to escape from a brute. “I need to get to another state,” she said, “I cannot stay here. He has already tracked me to the shelter. I have no money. Will you help?”

It was not convenient – it’s rarely convenient when someone is desperate – but the minister agreed to meet her in the church parking lot. The woman pulled out all of her paperwork, proof that she was not a sham. She was running for her life and the lives of her girls. “I have cut off my hair,” the woman said as she took off her hat. “And see, I have the papers for a new name right here. A shelter in another state is waiting for us. Please, can you help me?”

“Yes” the minister responded, “but how did you get my name? On the phone you said that someone at the shelter referred you, but I don’t know anyone on the staff there.” “It was not from staff,” she said. “It was from someone who was staying there. She said this church will help you.”

The minister asked, “What was her name?” The woman hesitated because you are not supposed to share the name of someone staying in a women’s shelter. But she saw the minister’s face and broke the rule. “It was a woman named Sherry.”

At that moment, the minister felt the earth shake as if a stone was being rolled away from a tomb. “Sherry got out?” The woman nodded yes. “She said you would help.”

The pastor told the woman to meet her at a nearby gas station and as she filled her tank with gas, the woman shouted, “We are free! I’m really going to be able to do it this time!” The pastor had another pastor on the phone who would meet her at the halfway mark of her journey and provide a second tank of gas. That meant she would reach her destination.

“I really am leaving! We really are free! Thank you, Jesus!” she cried.

As the minister watched her drive off, she peered into that empty tomb, and saw nothing less than resurrection, new life, a brand new creation. This woman and her girls were going to be safe. And Sherry was safe, too. The minister crawled into her car and the first words out of her mouth were, “Death – ha! – where is your sting?”¹

It was a resurrection moment. Darkness and death were defeated by light and new life.

This deadly pandemic that has the world in its grip has helped us better comprehend the connections that bind us to one another and how everyone benefits when we work together. Will we learn any enduring lessons from this crisis that could give rise to a better future?

Israeli Author David Grossman writes, “It may be that people will look at all manner of twisted handiwork of the society of abundance and excess and simply want to throw up. Perhaps they will suddenly be struck by the banal, naive awareness that it is absolutely terrible that there are people who are so rich and others who are so poor. That it is absolutely terrible that such a rich and sated world doesn’t give every baby who is born an equal opportunity. For surely, we are all one infectious human fabric, as we are now discovering. Surely the good of every person is ultimately the good of us all. Surely the good of the planet on which we live is our good, it is our well-being, the clearness of our breathing, and the future of our children.”²

God wants us to bury our desire for more material abundance and resurrect us to an abundance of generosity. God wants us to bury our attitude of entitlement and resurrect us to a mindset of gratitude. God wants us to bury our ways of living that lead to division and despair, and resurrect us to new ways of living that generate healing and hope.

May we not waste the opportunities this crisis will generate. May we seize them and work together to create a better, fairer, more beautiful world.

Why don’t you begin your list today? Your list of the ways you will live differently.

NOTES

1. Shannon J. Kershner, “Easter Stories,” April 21, 2019.
2. David Grossman, “The plague is a formative event. When it fades, new possibilities will emerge,” *Haaretz*, March 24, 2020

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, as the disciples huddled behind locked doors afraid for their lives, we find ourselves anxious and fearful as we shelter in place. This highly contagious virus is like nothing we have ever encountered and it sows seeds of uneasiness when we contemplate the future.

We worry about contracting the virus. We are afraid for the health of our family and our friends. We fear the financial impact that is a consequence of halting the spread of this virus and the millions who have lost their income. We wonder how long it will take us to stop the spread of Covid-19 and how long before a vaccine is developed. We worry about another deadly disease yet unknown that could be poised to ravage the globe.

Gracious God, while we possess many legitimate concerns, we pray for the courage to stand firm in the face of their intimidating presence and for the willpower to refuse their attempts to cripple us. May we garner a tenacious resolve from your Spirit and relentless stamina from one another.

Loving God, in Jesus you revealed yourself as a God of resurrection who brings light to places of darkness, comfort to those who grieve, joy even in the midst of lament, and courage to overcome anxiety. We pray that you will strengthen our spine during this time of uncertainty and never allow us to surrender our hope.

Everlasting God, liberate us from our tombs of worry. Arouse our sunken spirits with your promise that nothing can separate us from your love. And grant us the relentless determination to unbind whatever fear wraps itself around us, so that we can become energetic partners with you in the work of resurrection.

Now we join in the prayer the resurrected one taught us to pray together, giving us instructions on how to live, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.