April 25, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is undeniable that we have all been enduring a crisis such as has not been seen in over a century. As I write this, over 52,400 Americans have died from COVID-19 over a *two-month* period. [[1]](#footnote-1) The magnitude of fatalities over such a short span underscores that failure to act decisively would have been catastrophic. [[2]](#footnote-2) Nevertheless, the extraordinary mitigation measures required have posed untold hardships for many, and strangeness for all. I remarked to someone the other day that life has become so surreal that I keep expecting Rod Serling to pop out from around a corner to welcome me to the *Twilight Zone.*

This pandemic has also exposed hidden fault lines within our society and within ourselves. It is in the nature of a crisis, whether physical, psychological or spiritual, to test our resolve, our priorities and our carefully crafted identities. Each evening newscast confronts us with both our best and worst selves; the heroic solidarity of those combatting the COVID-19 pandemic on the front lines, and the shameless posturing and pandering that sow division and discord for fun and profit. It is quite natural for us to wonder where God may be in all of this calamity. Sometimes, in our perplexity and anxiety we may even feel as if we are going it alone as we shuffle along with our heads hanging low.

This must have been how the disciples hiking toward Emmaus also felt. They had pinned their hopes on Jesus, only to find themselves suddenly trudging along a winding road of confusion and disillusionment after witnessing his brutal crucifixion. Theirs was not only a journey from Jerusalem but also a journey from hope; wondering if their trust in God had been misplaced. It is at this point that a mysterious stranger joined their little pity processional, asking why they were so glum.

One of the disciples, named Cleopas, poured out the sad tale of how Jesus had come into the midst of everyday life bringing the word and power of God. Yet, just as things looked like they were on an upward track, their own religious authorities engaged in a marvel of back-room politics to condemn and kill this pesky prophet wannabe. Yet Jesus’ death was not even the end of the disciples’ emotional roller coaster ride because there were all these silly rumors circulating that Jesus was alive rather than dead.

It is at this point that their mysterious traveling companion gently chided them for failing to understand what the prophets had said of the God’s anointed one. He then gave a *Cliff Notes* summary of scripture climaxed by the revelation that God’s messiah would be a suffering servant handed over to those who despise and abuse him, yet against whom even death could not prevail. The disciples later commented that this gesture warmed their hearts, even if it didn’t necessarily change their minds.

When they finally reached their destination, the Holy-Day Inn, just off the Emmaus Turnpike, they invited their strange new teacher buddy to stay with them instead of traveling on. In fact, they pleaded with him because they *really* wanted to hear some more of his interesting takes on the Bible stories that they had learned as kids. But it was when their new-found friend joined them for dinner in the hotel restaurant that something extraordinary happened. We are told that when he blessed and broke the bread the waiter had brought to their table, the disciples finally recognized that it was Jesus who was with them. Then - *poof -*he was gone.

This familiar story has several things within it that we might want to consider in our present situation. First, it is no coincidence that Luke should present the Risen Jesus in the context of a “road trip.” The Bible frequently likens our own life stories to a pilgrimage and, in that sense, we are all metaphorically on that Road to Emmaus. The good news is that even though we cannot see the whole path, and the terrain may get pretty rough at times, we are never alone because God is walking with us and giving direction to our journeys even under the most trying of circumstances. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Next, did you notice how both the recognition and disappearance of Jesus are one and the same event? When the disciples recognized him, Jesus no longer sat across from them, but became one with them by giving them his own spirit of love. [[4]](#footnote-4) The event was transformative as the companion for their journey became the companion of their souls and they, in turn, became Christ-bearers to others.

Finally, the disciples’ encounter with a resurrected Lord resurrected their hope and transformed their lives. They wasted no time in returning to the very scene of their bitterest disappointment to proclaim that God was not done yet; that darkness, suffering and the grave do not have the last word. It has been said that discipleship *is* joy because it comes from trusting that God is moving and acting in love to restore all things, no matter how it may seem. In that sense, joy is not so much a component of the Christian faith as it is its very tone, [[5]](#footnote-5) and a sign of both psychological and spiritual maturity.

This story confronts us with both the limitations to our perception and the impermanence of all things. Even as the COVID-19 pandemic has relegated the familiar world of only 6 weeks ago to the past tense, so too will it pass. And while we cannot know what place or purpose this event will play in the larger whole - or even what tomorrow may bring – we can be assured of the permanence of God’s loving design for us even in the midst of a sea of changes.

Our own worldviews will spell the difference between seeing what tomorrow brings as a threat or an opportunity; between either succumbing to calamity or triumphing over adversity. I like to think that our forced captivity at home has given us an unparalleled opportunity to reassess our priorities, simplify our lives, and focus on what adds true joy. It also challenges us to ask ourselves whether or not we can humbly [[6]](#footnote-6) suspend our judgments of the universe and each other long enough to press the re-set button on our lives. Perhaps trusting that Jesus will meet us whenever we share with open hearts and minds [[7]](#footnote-7) will one day help us to see this pandemic as merely a grim mile-marker at the beginning of a new and better road.

Peace and Grace to You,

Dr. Bob

1. This stands in stark contrast to *annual* seasonal flu fatalities. CDC records 34,200 influenza deaths during the 2018-2019 season, and estimates a broad range between 24,000-52,000 for the 2019-2020 season. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I won’t delve into our pandemic mitigation measures except to say that they are textbook responses learned at great human expense during past pandemics as typified in the differing responses of St. Louis and Philadelphia during the 1918 influenza pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Deuteronomy 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Henri Nouwen, ***Bread for the Journey*** [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paraphrase of quotation by Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemann [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. St. John Chrysostom described humility as the “mother of all virtues,” and Nicholas Nassim Taleb wryly noted it to be the only virtue that cannot be faked. In Christianity, true humility is knowing the truth about ourselves and being at peace with it, because we know that we can grow in response to the grace of God. Humility is therefore not so much about behaviors that must be adopted as it is a way of being and relating to others rooted in realism and rigorous honesty. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This openness applies particularly to our use of Holy Scripture which we can grievously misunderstand as did these disciples. What is critical to note here is that the scriptures are not really accessible to us apart from the Presence and action of the God who inspires them. The inspiration of scripture is a decidedly *present* tense event. Scripture is therefore not a textbook or an archeological dig, but rather the warm embrace of Christ himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)