

“Easter in the Age of a Pandemic”

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(Luke 24:13-35)

Introduction.

Disruption. It’s a word that aptly describes what has happened since the coronavirus pandemic exploded onto the world scene and into our lives earlier this year. In many ways it feels like things are at a standstill, and we wonder when life is going to get back to being normal again.

I read an article about how Covid-19 is even disrupting the disruptors in the world today. It described how Airbnb disrupted the hospitality industry and changed the face of how people made arrangements for their lodging accommodations when they traveled. Last year the company was worth an estimated \$30 billion, and it planned to go public in 2020. Then the pandemic hit and it’s disrupting Airbnb. Travel is suspended, everyone is sheltering in place, and there has been a complete collapse in bookings. Hosts who had become dependent on income-generating properties to pay their bills are now being bled dry because of a lack of business, and already-suspicious neighbors are up-in-arms over the potential that short-term renters might spread the virus.

Many of you are dealing with the disruption of the pandemic in education, and you have either had to learn how to teach online or you’re becoming very proficient at home-schooling your children with the aid of technology. Others of you are in the medical field, and you know just how disruptive this disease has been. Hospitals are overwhelmed, surgical masks are in short supply, regular doctor’s appointments have been pushed back, and physicians are doing more telehealth virtual visits than ever before in their practice.

Covid-19 is also wreaking havoc on milestone celebrations like graduations, baptisms, and weddings. I talked to one person who is supposed to graduate from seminary this spring. She said the dean of her school is planning to do a virtual conferring of degrees, and they’ll schedule an opportunity to “walk” and be hooded later on this year. And I know firsthand how Covid-19 can impact one’s plans for a celebration. Have you ever tried to plan a wedding in the middle of a pandemic? It isn’t easy. Cyndy and I now have a Plan A, a Plan B, and a Plan C in the works! One way or another we’re going to get married later this year.

What does the celebration of Easter have to say to all of us in this time of a pandemic? Does the message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ provide encouragement or offer hope in a time like this? It most certainly does! Let’s remember that while restaurants, schools and businesses are empty, so was the tomb of Jesus! And that makes all the difference in the world whenever you experience a crisis in your life. I want us to take a look at the story of two people who were dealing with their own disruption and disappointment over recent events in their life and discover how the good news of Easter can speak to our situation today.

I. The Disruption of the Crucifixion.

In Luke 24 we read of two people who experienced a great disruption and the resulting disappointment, and the text indicates just how devastated they were by the events of the previous week. It's obvious these two individuals were reeling from the death of Jesus, and the passage says that Cleopas and his companion (who was perhaps his wife) "*stood there looking sad*" (24:17). You can also hear their despair in the words of frustration they speak: "*Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened there in these days? ... We had hoped that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel*" (24:18,21).

Here we have an example of two people who are struggling with the impact of a disruption. They're disillusioned, disoriented, the future looks bleak, and it feels like the forces of evil have won. It's in times like these that a spiritual perplexity often comes over us, and we find ourselves sad and maybe even depressed. Have you ever felt like that? Maybe you feel like that right now.

All of us know of times of disappointment and the feeling of abandonment, just like these disciples. We wonder, "Where are you, God?" This pandemic has prompted a lot of questions for every one of us. Why did this happen? How long is it going to last? What's going to happen in the future? And how am I going to provide for my family? The answer to these questions is we really don't know. And like these disciples, it's easy to become discouraged in a crisis.

Last week David Brooks wrote a column in the *New York Times* in which he talked about mental health in the age of the coronavirus, and he invited his readers to write to him and share how they're doing. Five thousand people wrote in, and they told of the struggle they're having with all the isolation and sheltering in place. Brooks wrote about how he himself is also struggling, and he said, "There's an invisible current of dread running through the world. It messes with your attention span. I don't know about you, but I'm mentally exhausted by 5 p.m. every day, and I think part of the cause is the unconscious stress flowing through us."¹

It is easy to be afraid during this time. Fear is a natural reaction in a pandemic. One of my late wife Lorie's favorite books she read as a young Christian in college was *Hinds Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hurnard. It's an allegorical story about a little goat named Much Afraid because she lived in fear of all that she encountered along her journey from the valleys of life to the mountaintop of God's love. One of the most valuable lessons of her arduous climb was to learn to rely on God's presence with her at all times. When she finally reached the peaks, her name was changed to Grace and Glory.²

Are you like Much Afraid, fearful of all that is happening around you, afraid of the future? How does God want you to learn to trust in His presence during this crisis?

II. When the Circumstances of Life Overwhelm Us.

The passage continues, "*[Jesus] said to them, 'How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself*" (Lk. 24:25-27).

Jesus analyzed the problem of these two believers, and He pointed out that their sadness of heart was the result of a failure to believe and trust. And Jesus pointed out that this was caused by two things. First, they allowed the circumstances of life to control them. These disciples let the events of the preceding week shatter their faith and their hope in the Lord.

Even after the reports of some of the disciples, they remained defeated and doubted the truth of what was said. They weren't able to rise above their circumstances and trust God.

In his column in the *New York Times* David Brooks said that during this period of isolation many people are alone, and all they're doing is watching media all day long. Others are trapped in homes with dysfunction, and in France it's reported that cases of domestic violence are up by about a third. Alcohol and drug use is also on the rise. One researcher found that there is another curve behind the Covid-19 curve. He says that for every one-percentage-point increase in unemployment it eventually leads to a 3.5 percent increase in opioid addiction. So the pandemic's economic effects alone will exacerbate our drug and mental health problems in this country down the road.

Psychological and spiritual health in times of crisis is like a wrestling match. The situation throws stressors at you, and the question is whether your coping mechanisms are strong enough to overcome them. But people who put their trust in Christ have a spiritual resource that can help, and they can become like Noah's Ark. When the water of trouble surrounded the vessel, the ark rose and floated above the destruction below. With the help of God's Spirit believers can be like Peter who was able to walk on water when he kept his eyes fixed upon Jesus, and he was able to rise above the turbulent wind and the waves.

It is possible in the Christian life to have the ability to rise above your circumstances. We can have hope, even in the midst of trouble, because we know that all is not as it appears. God is sovereign, and He is at work both to will and to do according to His good pleasure in our lives and in the world!

If you're in a tough spot right now, perhaps you can make Psalm 71 your prayer: *"In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn you ear to me and save me. Be my rock and refuge to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress."* These are verses of Scripture worth reading every day during this difficult season.

The second reason for the despair of these two disciples was a failure to know the Scriptures and apply them to their lives. Jesus said, *"How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken... And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself."* Notice that the word "all" is used here three times in this passage. Jesus spoke the whole counsel of God.

The best way to combat spiritual depression is to study the Scriptures and apply them to your life. Remember the promises of God and trust what the Lord has shown to be true in the light whenever you have to go through times of darkness. Isn't that what Jesus did when He was tempted in the wilderness in Matthew 4 and experienced His own disruption? To the three temptations of Satan, Jesus responded, *"It is written...it is written...it is written."* And when Satan quoted Scripture as a part of the second temptation, Jesus responded, *"It is also written..."* He knew the whole counsel of God. A failure to know the Scriptures and apply them to your life is a chief cause of despair when we're in the middle of a crisis like a pandemic.

You and I need to spend time in the Bible on a regular basis if we're going to be able to cope with this pandemic. Make some time every day to read Scripture and meditate on its truth. Ask God to speak to you, and He will.

III. The Nearness of God in Times of Trouble.

Sometimes we have no idea how near Jesus is to us, especially in our darkest moments. Cleopas and his companion were in despair. All their hopes had been dashed, and now the whole world seemed to be spinning out of control after the crucifixion. Every one of the disciples had scattered in fear, and no one seemed to know what was going on. There was no one to lead. And no one to follow.

But Jesus was nearer than they realized. He walked up behind them and engaged them in conversation. Jesus got them to talk about their lives and their disappointment which in turn made them receptive to what He had to say. Then Jesus explained the Scripture to them (27,32). He took them over Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, and He showed them that the Christ was supposed to die and then be raised to glory. This was God's plan. What had taken place in Jerusalem wasn't an accident. Jesus wasn't a victim of circumstance. No. The God of history was at work in all that happened, and it was foretold in the prophecies of the OT many years before.

Finally, Jesus revealed His presence to them in the breaking of the bread (29-31). Perhaps it brought a flashback in their minds of the Last Supper when Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to His disciples and said, *"Take eat, this is my Body which is broken for you."* It's interesting to note that the Lord didn't force Himself on these disciples. Rather, Jesus waited for their invitation. Their receptivity allowed Christ to do a mighty work in their lives that day, and the text says *"their eyes were opened."*

Have you experienced the nearness of God during this pandemic? I know I have. And I don't think I would be able to cope with all of this disruption in the world if it wasn't for the stabilizing influence of God's Holy Spirit in my life. I've found that it is often the times of greatest pain and struggle that I experience the nearness of God the most. It's when I'm at the end of my rope that I discover that God is truly there.

Author Anne Snyder reminds us that there is a motif in Scripture most people tend to ignore because it makes them feel uncomfortable, but it is a motif that is repeated throughout the Bible, and it is central to its teaching. The principle is this: Pain, hardship, and even death is a harbinger of new life. One sees this pattern over and over again in Scripture, but we see it most clearly at Easter. It was the death of Jesus Christ that was the prelude to the resurrection and His victory over sin and death. In the Bible we read story after story that say when the times were the hardest and the night was the darkest, God came near and He began something new. He brought salvation, and He came to the rescue.³

I believe He's doing it again. I don't have a crystal ball and I don't know what the future holds with this pandemic, but I've been noticing a few things which lead me to believe that God is up to something in all this and that good lies on the other side of a world that is being remade. Throughout the history of the world, in spite of their devastation, plagues have been occasions when God cracked open the hearts of people and helped them see their need for Him in a fresh way. Historically, pandemics have been times when authoritarian leaders have been subverted, and crises have created new opportunities for justice and peace to come into the world. It levels the playing field, and everyone is in the same predicament. And also throughout history the church has shined as a beacon of light whenever there was a catastrophe.

In his column David Brooks pointed to the positives of the pandemic, and he said that our national identity is being remade in real time. "What had once seemed a bitter and divided

society now seems more like a nation of people finding creative ways to show up for one another.”⁴ That’s a good thing.

Conclusion.

Recently a friend shared with me an image of Claude Monet’s painting *Impression, Sunrise*. It was painted in 1872 in France, and many scholars believe it launched the whole impressionist movement in art in the 19th century. If you look at the painting you’ll notice that the sky is filled with the fog of uncertainty about what lies ahead, the water is a little choppy, and the horizon is gloomy. And notice the man in his little boat, striking out over the water alone, isolated, not sure where he is headed.



That feels like the time we’re living in right now, doesn’t it? The fog of uncertainty hangs over all of us like a cloud today. Nothing appears certain. How much more suffering will there be? How many more people are going to die? Will it strike my home and the people I love? What is going to happen with the economy? And when will life return to normal?

But look again at the painting. Do you see the sun peeking through on the horizon? It promises that the sunrise is on the way. 2,700 years ago the prophet Hosea urged the people of his day, “*Let us strive to know the Lord, whose coming is as sure as the sunrise. He will come to us like the rain, like spring rains that water the earth*” (Hosea 6:3).

It could be that God wants to use the disruption of Covid-19 to get your attention and invite you into a deeper relationship with Him. God is nearer than you realize, just like He was for

these two disciples. And He wants to help you during this time when you feel so disoriented and unable to gain your footing, just as Jesus did for them. Christ will see you through this crisis, and the good news of Easter is just what we need in this time of despair. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God! Alleluia!

¹ David Brooks, “Mental Health in the Age of the Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/opinion/mental-health-coronavirus.html>. Accessed on April 10, 2020.

² Hannah Hurnard, *Hinds Feet on High Places* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1975).

³ Anne Snyder, “The Great Reset: Make way for a World Remade,” in *Comment Magazine*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-great-reset/>. Accessed on April 10, 2020.

⁴ David Brooks, *op. cit.*