

Update from the Protestant Chaplain

Sunday, April 12, 2020

Easter Sunday

Happy Easter!

Saturday was a beautiful day in Williamstown, and it was the first time I ventured out of my neighborhood to restock supplies. It seemed like everyone had the same idea for Stop and Shop was full and there was more traffic on Spring Street. I saw one student and we briefly chatted – social distancing of course, I picked up food from a restaurant which was practicing social distancing. In a restaurant where I had ordered take-out, the greeting by the people in the restaurant was warm but we were all wearing masks and we waved and said muffled hellos. The post office had tape on the ground and instructions on how to wait in line observing social distancing. The Stop and Shop also used tape on the floor to direct traffic within the aisles. Grocery store employees served as traffic coordinators in masks and gloves at the end of each aisle, directing traffic. It appears as if they had hired new people for, I did not recognize the cashier, but then again, we were all wearing masks. I drove by Tunnel City, which was open for take-out anyway. As much as I like the coffee and the lattes, I realize that I often go into Tunnel to see who's there. I drove away, feeling a bit sad. For being out and about town during a pandemic made me realize how much I was missing the little things that constituted normal, the brief interactions with people, the casual conversations that sometimes inspired an essay or a sermon, running into people with new babies, new ideas, new thoughts or a new joke. And where were the students? Even in the summer, there are students, but no students, I'm never going to get used to students not being here. It was a beautiful day in Williamstown, but it was far from normal.

Sunrise and morning were often my favorite part of Easter – the new light of a new day, a time to celebrate new hopes and new possibilities. Although some of this is sad, the loss of normal has helped me appreciate what had been normal before COVID 19.

This past week I tuned into a livestream broadcast of a webinar about the post pandemic church. That's right, although it appears, we may have at least two more months of social distancing, some ministries are already thinking about what's coming next. This is actually wise because it's a way of saying, something's different, but we need to at least think about what's next. This webinar said the only thing we do know is that things are going to be different. Because we are in the middle of the COVID 19 crisis, we cannot tell what's going to happen. The advice I gleaned from the webinar was to live in the moment and to use this moment to review your life before the pandemic. For me, living in the moment has helped me review life in the pandemic. Why did I not walk more before the pandemic? Why did I not care as much about my cleaning supplies as I do now?

The celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, one of the two most important events in the Christian calendar (Christmas being the other) is both wonderful and

challenging. For many, the theological challenges of who Jesus is (Son of God, Incarnate Christ, teacher, prophet, healer) are difficult enough. But raising someone from the dead, well, that's also its own challenge and even more difficult to believe. Our understanding of resurrection in the modern era has more to do with coming back from the brink of death. Mostly dead, but not dead seems to be more acceptable. Resurrection of the soul is embraced by many faith traditions, including Christianity. But resurrection of the body has always been a challenge. For some of the early Christians, there was an expectation that a resurrection required something to have died and to have been completely dead. The Good Friday readings contain detailed explanations of the drama of the collection of Jesus' body from the cross. In John's gospel, this [moment](#) features two of Jesus' secret disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. This scene is the set up for the resurrection, when Jesus reappears alive before his friends and disciples. During the fifty days after the resurrection, Jesus is making appearances, hanging out with people and teaching about this mystery they were witnessing, his death and resurrection. After these fifty days, Jesus ascends into heaven and the disciples are told to take care of each other and tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ, contained in the stories of his teachings, recounting events such as healing the blind man, confrontations with religious leaders and more personal stories about Jesus from his friends. The Good News – that world and its people are loved by its Creator.

However, it's hard to process the happy ending of the resurrection when the world is still in its Good Friday moment of the coronavirus pandemic. We are going into the fifth week of the new normal. We know one day this will pass, but what will it leave behind? Who will we be after this period is over? I don't know but this question makes me think of one of the sub narratives within the resurrection story: found in Luke's gospel ([Luke 24:13–35](#)) and in Mark's gospel ([Mark 16:12–13](#)). Both accounts depict Jesus walking somewhere and joining other persons walking on the same road. These walkers do not recognize Jesus. In both accounts, the walkers tell Jesus about the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. While the gospel of Mark does not include a destination for the walkers, Luke's gospel describes the walker's destination as the town of Emmaus. These walkers invited Jesus to come along with them to Emmaus and to stay for dinner. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus remains unrecognizable to walkers until he broke bread with them. Then they recognized him as Jesus. This scene is depicted in two paintings by Caravaggio: ([1601, London](#)) and ([1606, Milan](#)).

My favorite is the 1601 painting where the appearance of Jesus is so different from how he had been depicted in art for centuries. For the most part, Jesus has been depicted as having a thin gaunt face (like the 1606 painting.) However, in the 1601 painting, it was as if Caravaggio had changed Jesus' depiction to emphasize how his physical difference had been altered. The 1601 painting depicts a chubby faced Jesus, looking more like a cherub than an itinerant preacher and healer living on the run on a diet of fish and bread. This painting is a reminder that after death and loss, there is change. And this change may be different from what had been there before. This painting is a reminder to me that our world is not sinking into an abyss, but it is changing into something different and something new.

On this Easter, I leave you with this hopeful thought, that as we are in a time of change and loss, we will also be changed, we don't know how, but I am hopeful that this change is into something new. Some things will remain, but some things will be lost. But something new will come, something new like a new morning, or new day. Regardless of what you may believe about Jesus, the resurrection, COVID 19, the celebration of Easter, I hope that you can live in the moment, review what has been, and look forward to something new.

Happy Easter.

Rev. Valerie