

**“WILL THINGS EVER BE THE SAME AS BEFORE?”**

**1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

**Woodbury UMC**

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In last Monday’s newspaper, there was a photo of an 83-year old woman in Waterbury who enjoyed a happy surprise on Easter Sunday. Like all of us, she had been cooped up in her house for weeks, and she was dreading the thought of spending Easter without worshipping in her church and hosting her loved ones for dinner afterwards. Well, the picture showed this woman standing in the front yard of her home, facing all of the members of her family. They had showed up unexpectedly and were standing beside their cars parked out on the street. It was a remarkable scene, because this woman has a very large family – 8 children, 23 grandchildren, and 22 great grandchildren – and they were all there, extending their arms toward their family matriarch in a virtual hug.

Each of us had to modify our observance of Easter a week ago, which included changes in how we traditionally connect with our church family and our flesh-and-blood-family. You and I would never have chosen to do it that way; but the pandemic is what it is, and we’re all doing what we have to do to get through it. I must say that I’ve been greatly impressed by the adaptability and patience so many of you have demonstrated over the past few weeks. In my conversations with you, you have consistently voiced your resolve to take whatever steps are necessary to stay safe and healthy, and to ensure a similar good outcome for others.

But in these same conversations, I’ve heard one particular question raised time and time again, and it’s a question none of us can answer: “When will this be over?” The question refers first and foremost to the scourge of the pandemic itself; but it also refers to the huge side effects of the pandemic – sheltering at home, social distancing in public, and the shuttering of businesses, schools, and churches. Given the magnitude of the changes we’ve been asked to make, all of us experience moments when our patience wears thin, when we yearn desperately for a return to normalcy.

From what I read and hear, we have reason to be hopeful that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Health care officials expect Coronavirus infections to surge, peak, decline, and then hopefully go dormant, which means that the worst of the pandemic will finally be behind us. By the same token, government officials are beginning to discuss a timetable for reopening the economy and relaxing restrictions on social contacts. We don’t know precisely how or when, but most of us trust that this crisis will eventually be over.

However, there is another question that I’ve begun to hear you ask, and that I’ve begun to ask myself. Suppose we get the virus under control and start resuming our usual routines. Will things ever be the same as before? To be more specific, will you and I feel comfortable and confident again about going out in public? Will we be able to view fellow shoppers at the grocery store as good neighbors rather than potential carriers of a deadly disease? Will we feel entirely safe about going back to work, or sending our children back to school, or going to a movie or sporting event? And, will we feel as secure as we used to feel about meeting together in this room for worship? The magic day will surely come when the doors to our sanctuary will

reopen and we will be a gathered community again. But when this happens, will you and I feel free to hug each other, to work closely together in the church kitchen or the choir room, to receive Communion from a common cup? Will things ever be the same as before?

As it turns out, this question is written all over the biblical story of Easter. Early in the morning on that first Easter day, the disciples of Jesus are quite certain that things will never be the same for them. They have spent three years in the company of the greatest man who ever lived. Their time with him was often demanding, sometimes even disturbing, but it was also thrilling and promising. Now Jesus is dead, lying in a borrowed tomb; and the kingdom movement he brought to life also appears to be dead.

According to John's account of Easter morning, Mary Magdalene comes alone to Jesus' tomb, finds it empty, and assumes that Jesus' body has been taken away. She runs to Peter and John to tell them the distressing news. The men run to the tomb and confirm that it is empty. As Mary stands outside the tomb weeping, two angels show up to console her; and then Jesus himself appears to her, at first incognito. When she finally recognizes Jesus, she leaves the tomb to tell all the disciples that she has seen the risen Lord. They are neither convinced by Mary's testimony, nor even hopeful that she might be reporting a real fact. That evening the disciples are not in church singing Easter hymns; they are huddled behind closed doors, hiding from the religious authorities, fearing for their own lives.

And then, Jesus somehow enters that locked room, speaks words of peace and comfort, and shows them his wounded hands and side. In an instant all the disciples who are present recognize Jesus, just as Mary did that morning, and they are filled with joy. Thomas is the only disciple who is absent from the happy reunion that night, but this same scene is repeated for his benefit a week later. Jesus again enters the room through locked doors and reveals himself to Thomas. By the Sunday after Easter, all the disciples have seen first-hand that Jesus is alive again.

Now, John doesn't put these words into the disciples' mouths, but it's easy to imagine them saying, "Jesus is back – just like old times! Once again, we'll have his companionship and counsel. His kingdom movement will pick up right where it ended on Good Friday. Things will be the same as they were before!"

But it becomes quickly apparent that things are not the same. As we have seen, Jesus is not immediately recognizable to Mary. There is something different about his resurrected body, so at first glance Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. What's more, over the next forty days Jesus gets into this strange pattern of appearing and then disappearing. He keeps company with the disciples, teaches them and share meals with them, just like he does in the good ol' days. But the resurrected Jesus lives in a mysterious, more elusive mode of being. The disciples can't pin him down; he is here one moment, gone the next. And at the end of these forty days, he disappears completely from their sight, ascending to heaven.

This is what happens after that first Easter: Jesus comes back to the disciples, but in a different form; he remains with them for a brief period of time, and then he leaves them again. The disciples gradually realize that this is not the old normal after all. They are uncertain and anxious about what lies ahead in their new normal. But here's what really stands out in the post-Easter story: not only is Jesus different after his resurrection; the disciples are different, too.

Before the resurrection, they never really understand who Jesus is or what his mission is about. They bicker among themselves, jockeying for position to see who will be the greatest in the kingdom of God. They are fickle in their commitment, so that in the end their loyalty to Jesus is just as shallow and fragile as that of the crowds. When Jesus is crucified they practice their own form of social distancing, hiding behind locked doors, immobilized by fear. This is a thumbnail sketch of how the disciples behave before the resurrection, and it's not a pretty picture.

But after the resurrection, the disciples come out of hiding to become bold witnesses to the risen Christ. They are full of hope and energy and compassion. They seek to serve rather than be served. They are transformed individuals who set out to transform the whole world. Peter describes their post-Easter makeover in the introduction to his first epistle: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1 Peter 1:3).

Because Jesus is different and the disciples are different, the disciples' relationship with Jesus is also different. After the resurrection and then again after the ascension, they learn that their new way of being with Jesus is in some respects better than the old way. He is no longer physically present with them in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, but he can be spiritually present with them in any time or place. The followers of Jesus go out from Easter to face hardship, persecution, and death to a degree that you and I cannot even imagine; but they go out joyfully and hopefully because they know that Jesus is with them every step of the way.

Which brings us back to the situation in which you and I find ourselves today. We are like the disciples, suspended between Good Friday and Easter, sifting through "memories of the way we were," wishing for things to return to normal. We look forward to the day when we are free to hug our family members, go back to school, return to work, take a vacation, entertain friends, and come to church.

However, we need to be careful about what we wish for. When the pandemic subsides, do we really want everything to be the same as it was before? Do you and I wish to return to a life where we took so much for granted, where we had a sense of complacency and entitlement about our health, our jobs, our mobility, our relationships, our basic freedoms? Do we want to return to a time when America was deeply divided along the lines of politics, race, gender, and income? Do we want to turn the clock back to the days when the United Methodist Church was doing its darnedest to become disunited?

"Will things ever be the same as before?" Well, in some ways, I hope not! I don't for a moment minimize the inconvenience and danger we are enduring these days. But I'm going to hazard saying that this new normal is superior in a lot of respects to the old normal. The pandemic has made all of us more realistic and humble about our humanity, because we now know, if we didn't know before, that we cannot control everything. In our solitude, we've had time to get to know ourselves better and reflect on what is most important to us. Many of us have become more consistent and creative about connecting with other people. We've become more thoughtful and caring toward our neighbors, looking for ways to offer assistance and encouragement. Perhaps most surprising of all, the people of our country and the nations of the world have actually drawn closer together, because we are fighting a common enemy rather than each other.

Closer to home, think about the changes that the pandemic has mandated in the life of our own church. For the moment, the bottom has dropped out of our worship attendance; but ironically, our worship participation now has the potential to be greater than ever before. I've never desired to be a TV preacher, but there I am on your home screen, courtesy of the Internet, and there are likely other people watching right now whom you and I have never met. As one pastor in our area put it, "This pandemic has caused us to be a church without walls, to minister to people we literally didn't have the ability to minister to before."

My daughter Kate keeps me supplied with quotes from individuals who are writing thoughtfully about our lives before, during and after the pandemic. Early last week she texted me the photo of a message someone had simply scrawled on a piece of notebook paper. The message read: "Nothing should go back to normal. Normal wasn't working. If we go back to the way things were, we will have lost the lesson. May we rise up and do better."

In a similar vein, on Easter Sunday our resident sage at the Republican-American, Tracy O'Shaughnessy, shared her latest reflections on the Coronavirus outbreak. She noted that history has been full of natural catastrophes like floods and plagues and pandemics, which some people interpret as acts of divine judgment. O'Shaughnessy doesn't go that far, but she does see these events as opportunities to take stock of how we live our lives and then choose to do things differently and better. We all know that this is easier said than done. Instead of learning from our past mistakes, we have a tendency just to repeat them. We want things to be the same as they were before.

Tracy O'Shaughnessy concluded her article with these words: "Once COVID-19 has claimed its last 21<sup>st</sup> Century victim, those who remain will be graced with a life choice – to refresh, or simply repeat."

By the power of the risen, living Christ, may you and I make the right choice.