

Keep Talking

Scripture text: Luke 24:1-12

The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey

Center Church on the Green, Easter Day, April 4, 2021



I promise on this beautiful morning that I'm not going to spend this entire meditation talking about the pandemic. But we have to admit that on Easter Day the thoughts of loss and rising and new life bring it to mind.

We marked the anniversary of pandemic isolation about 3 weeks ago, but it is this weekend—Easter weekend—that it all came home last spring. After all, we really didn't know back in the early days of Lent just what was going on, or what could be done about it. Medical scientists were saying that two weeks of isolation could tamp things down, so we isolated. I recently looked back at the first communications I sent to our church family and friends: I said at the time we were planning to be out that Sunday and the next Sunday. I was a little naïve.

It was really Easter Day that let us know we were in it for the long haul. That's a day of sunrise services, breakfast, everybody dressing up and the choir bringing out their best materials. And, none of that happened last Easter. For churches that ignored the

warnings, all that proximity led to Covid-19 infections that did not discriminate between the sanctified pew-sitter and the pastor.

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This weekend the newspaper published a survey of its readers about their experience with the pandemic. I'm guessing the reporters thought they would gather some good tips for coping. Maybe their readers could offer something inspirational that would pick up others.

Sorry. The responses were indeed remarkable, but more for how they marked a sense of drifting and despair.

- A chemist in Oregon said, "I don't know who is going to crack first, me or the pandemic."
- A translator in Madrid said "I can't focus....I get up, I drink tea, I spend 8 to 12 hours in front of the computer...and then I go to bed....I'm lucky to have a job, but I fantasize about quitting all the time."
- A graphic designer in Brooklyn wrote "The Microsoft Teams ringtone strikes fear in my heart and the Slack buzz [instills] dread in my spirit."
- An art professor in Texas mused "I dream about vacations to which I cannot drive."

- And in talking about what helps her cope, an emergency medicine physician in New York wrote “I focus on my family, on keeping them happy and healthy. I also eat jelly beans.”¹

The article stood out for another reason: it made little mention of what drove us to this isolation in the first place. Fearing a deadly disease can't really be talked about. We can talk about the lost of family pets or famous celebrities, but the readers steered clear of the big losses.² Even in a time when over half a million people have died because of the virus, no one wants to talk about it.³

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That's not a huge surprise. Death is what makes life so precious to us. Beneath all the aimlessness and ennui in the survey is a sense of unfairness about death. We come to terms with our mortality by expecting a certain life span. Even though that life span varies, we still want the full measure of our time.

¹ “Here's What Readers Told Us About Feeling Burned Out”, by Sophia June. *The New York Times*, 3 April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/03/business/readers-pandemic-burnout.html>, retrieved from the Internet 4/3/2021.

² “We Have All Hit a Wall,” by Sarah Lyall. *The New York Times*, 3 April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/03/business/pandemic-burnout-productivity.html>, retrieved from the Internet 4/3/2021

³ “Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count,” by *The New York Times*, 3 April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>, retrieved from the Internet 4/3/2021.

When something like a virus comes along it's like a wrench throw into the works of our expectations. It's jarring and unsettling, and we feel shaken.

In this past year many of us have said more goodbyes, much sooner than we expected. There are the big losses. They may not seem important against the background of 30 million cases. But when it's your parent, or your sibling, or someone else you love, the loss looms large and must be grieved.

And there are the smaller losses...the ones that are harder to measure. There are the industries and occupations where the bottom just fell out...everything from travel to live theater to little cupcake shops. And the risks taken by those brave people we've learned to call "essential workers." And if you're not considered essential, and you have a job, how about all those hours and days and months sitting in home offices dressed from the waist up?

The larger and smaller losses lead us to wish...I don't know...to wish that a hundred things could have been different in these past 12 months. We wish collectively that we could have been better prepared, or that our society could have agreed to trust medicine and science. Above all we wish that this pandemic year could have gone by without being marked by so much loss.

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And maybe that's why this story of one person rising from death should have a different outcome. We'd love to have back those we lost, and you'd think that the news of the empty tomb would have been received more readily than it was.

Jesus had said to his followers again and again that he would not be bound by death. Yes, the words Luke records point to an inevitable and violent death, but there is that mysterious phrase: "on the third day I will be raised up." Everyone agreed that Jesus' words could get him into trouble, but no one knew what to make of this idea about rising again.

But hear the same words in the stillness of the early morning...from the mouths of two men that the women arriving at the tomb did not know...and following the discovery that the tomb was now empty...to the women it made sense.

In recalling Jesus' words the women start to re-member that community he had brought together. Jesus had talked about vine and branches. He had talked about being members of one body. That fellowship had been torn apart by the events of Good Friday.

"Re-membering" was about bringing together scattered parts of the body and knitting them back into a single vibrant community.

That was good news. That was worth coming back to the gathering place and telling the apostles and grieving followers what they had found.

Picture this: those who were living in the aftermath of the Crucifixion did not want to talk about an empty tomb. Luke says the remaining apostles thought that Mary and Mary and Joanna and the others were telling a story that was less than real. It was wild gossip, idle speculation. It was fake news.

Even when the women persisted they were not believed. But as they continued to talk, a “What if?” question popped up in one mind. Luke says that it was the “What if?” that propelled Peter to the garden tomb. Whether he believed or was driven by a guilty conscience is debatable. But that question of “What if?” was sparked because the women kept talking. And even if Peter was a puzzled witness he was able to move past his lethargy and despond.

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When Mary and Mary and Joanna start talking...start “re-membering” ...they invite life back into their lives. The appendages of the body of Christ, scattered and dispirited, start to draw back together and gain strength from each other.

We need that resurrection hope. Even and especially in this time, when the threat of infection is still very high, we need to

remember that we are one body. We live in one hope, the hope of rising with Christ to a life like Christ's. And that resurrection hope can help us start to re-member the body of our community of faith.

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That hope for life and new life in Christ gives us ears to hear the story of Jesus' followers on that Easter morning.

May the spirit of the women...the spirit of Peter...knit together the bonds that have been strained so badly this past year. And, may the spirit of the risen Christ give us new hope in these days of remembering. Alleluia! Amen.