

Easter: The New Normal¹

I heard several years ago of a successful and dedicated Presbyterian minister who was serving an equally impressive church. In the middle of his pastorate, his son died. The church members of that church remember that that tragedy took something vital away from their pastor. He coasted into his retirement. Spent inordinate time on his boat. For ten years the church simply existed and languished because its minister simply existed and languished.

You may be able to tell a similar story of the impact of loss, not only a death but maybe a job loss or divorce. Sometimes our whole sense of meaning and joy gets attached to a child or lover and if we lose that person, life itself is never the same.

I'm pretty sure that that's what it was like for the disciples of Jesus when the one whom they had followed and staked their hopes on was arrested and executed so brutally. The disciples had seen something in Jesus that was fresh and wonderful. He spoke of powerful things. In his company, Jesus' followers witnessed unspeakably precious moments when people came to Jesus and begged him for help.

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on April 4, 2010 in the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga. Other downloadable sermons and church resources may be found at www.fpclagranger.org

Then it was gone. And what took it away wasn't an unfortunate natural cause like cancer or heart attack. It was the very world that had seemed so magical and new and full of God, rearing up and slamming back and brutally slaying Jesus. Here they had thought that the Messiah had come; here they thought that the demons didn't have the last word; here they thought that the poor could breathe free again, and suddenly it is brutally cut down. What does a follower of Jesus think about the world and life, with Jesus now lying in a tomb?

You and I don't have to be in the raw aftermath of losing a loved one to feel some of what the disciples must have felt when they lost Jesus. How's the world looking to you these days? How's America looking? How's the church looking? How are you feeling about life for your children or grandchildren? Will their lives have the richness and the relationships and the substance that you treasure in your own growing up? Or does it seem some of the soul and wonderfulness of life has quietly drained away in our times?

I feel it. I'm living in a stage that is as comfortable and stable as any time in my adult life. And I experience a sense of decline that comes by receiving a thousand pin pricks to my optimism. Sixty percent of Americans think the nation is on the wrong track. That's a pin prick. Researchers have demonstrated scientifically that young adults are more

measurably mentally ill than ever before. Pin prick. A very nervous grass roots tea party movement is feeling that the drift to the political left is taking us down. A year ago, the electorate thought that the drift to the political right was taking us down. Unemployment just marches on. All pin pricks.

Add to this our personal struggles. Many here are visiting the doctor for some new and scary ailment. Many would love to re-locate and change jobs and can't sell the house. Some of us are here but your hearts are breaking because of some woundedness in a family relationship. No, we're not weeping and scared for our lives as were the disciples who witnessed the death of their lord. But I'm guessing that we feel some of their disappointment and some of their bewilderment.

Now, if I'm anywhere close to describing how things might look or feel for you in this moment, you'll be interested in this next part. Something happened for the original disciples, in the midst of their grieving and huddling together in confusion. It was something that was completely unexpected and unprecedented, and even un-hoped for. And that something didn't make it feel a little better. That something changed their world.

Actually, it was two things that happened. First, some of the women in the disciple band, discovered the tomb of Jesus to be empty. In itself, an opened tomb those days was not all that

remarkable. Hey, they lived in a gritty time. It was nothing for some of the bottom feeders of society back then to dig up bodies or sneak into tombs and strip the corpses of anything of value. So, the tomb was empty.

The other thing was that disciples started meeting Jesus alive. This statement may surprise you, but this too was not wholly astounding. I'd say that a goodly proportion of you who have lost husbands or wives will tell me that you'll forget momentarily that they're gone and catch yourself expecting that that person will come walking in through that door, just as they had for 52 years. So maybe a person will forget for an instant that someone who has died has left a lot of impressions on our minds and these don't disappear right away.

But here's where this gets astounding. Seeing Jesus and also witnessing that his tomb is empty, means with compelling certainty that what has happened is...is...huge!

Do you know how when lightning strikes real close there is this deafening bang and flash. Atmospheric chemists tell us that lightning produces ozone and other chemicals that give a fresh air kind of smell. Lightning also discharges the positive charge that has built up on the ground and in trees and so on.

For Jesus to be brought back to life by God the Father was like a lightning strike. It changed everything in an instant. You see, after the disciples got over the shock of seeing Jesus

again alive, it began to dawn on them how a lot of other things had changed too. It's like Easter Day ushered in the "new normal." I love that expression! Something new has come along. And it's not going away. The new normal.

For example, the cruelty of people who killed Jesus, didn't seem so strong. It's as if evil threw everything it had at Jesus and it still couldn't win. What a refreshing discovery! All of a sudden, the idea that people rise from the dead wasn't a pious but remote hope for the end of history—whenever that was supposed to be. Suddenly, there was a first example of resurrection walking around. Maybe the end of history was already under way! If so, that's a new normal. All of a sudden, the fuzzy ideas about the Kingdom of God that Jesus was forever talking about, and how prayers were answered, and good things happened to bad people suddenly seemed very real. The new normal. All of a sudden, the idea that Jesus was a bad man because the religion leaders said so, was obviously wrong. The new normal is not having to listen to the big shot religious crowd.

The lightning crack of the resurrection was the abrupt verdict of God the Father on everything that had been happening came in with deafening clarity. Jesus was right. Jesus was the messiah. Jesus...dare we even think this...Jesus was God. That changes everything.

Now, here's where this affects you and me. The same lightning crack that changed everything on that first Easter, is still in effect today. It's fashionable today to write off Easter as a psychological phenomenon that took place in the emotions of Jesus' bereaved followers. Scholars write hard-to-read books that suggest the Easter faith is a made-up ending to the story of Jesus which hadn't ended the right way in reality. It's as if Christianity never would have become a major religion if Jesus' execution were the final word.

The problem with explanations like these is they are less plausible than the simple truth. God raised Jesus from the dead. No one expected that. No one was even hoping or praying for that. And no one really knew what to do with it—at least at first. Because the rising of Jesus from the grave is history as much as anything is history, then it really has happened also for you and me. Of course it was a long time ago. But the effect is just as momentous. It's taken awhile for the sound of the thunder to reach our ears. But we've heard it too and it means for us that that lightning really has cracked. And that lightning really has changed everything. It inaugurated a new and wonderful normal.

The next time I get down about where our society is headed I'll remember the new normal. Jesus lives. No matter what the temporary setback, God still holds current events in the palm of

his hand. Evil will never ultimately win. The next time life seems governed by impossibilities, like the impossibility of people changing, the impossibility of some people setting aside their differences, the impossibility of poor people rising out of their entrapment, or the impossibility of me being a better person and a clearer channel of God's love, when I get down about these things, I'll remember that Jesus lives. The next time I run up against some wrong that just seems beyond hope of change, I'll remember that the one who taught that God answers prayer was also the one who God raised from the dead.

You see, the lightning has flashed, we've heard the thunder. Jesus lives. There's a new normal now. And it changes even you and me.