

OPENING

Last year around this time I started a folder on my computer entitled simply: “CORONA.”

Inside it, I put links to all the articles that were coming out fast and furious about how churches needed to adjust to the new reality of the pandemic.

You might have had something similar happening in your workplace or in your life: a veritable flood of ideas, think-pieces, doomsday reports, giant lists of things that you should/ could/ MUST do at this time.

The pace of these articles was so intense that I never got around to really reading them, I just kept bookmarking, cutting and pasting, and inventorying them in a central location.

Whenever I did glance at them, I realized that we were already doing that stuff anyway or circumstances had changed so drastically that they were irrelevant. So this folder kept collecting virtual dust, as we transitioned into virtual services here, then at home, then back here, and with all the changes that you have witnessed over the last 13 months.

Maybe it was our glorious Easter Day celebration last week, or maybe all the “COVID-19 one year later” think-pieces, or maybe it was the notion that we are getting closer, mercifully, to the end, but something drew me back to take a peek into that folder and see what we missed, or did not miss.

It’s a stretch to say that effort was similar to what the Disciples—on that first Easter Evening—were doing while huddled into that room behind locked doors.

But they probably were doing some sort of post-mortem (literally!)

The disciples’ heads must have been spinning from the events of the last three days so I imagine there being a lot of second-guessing, some shouting and fear, maybe some despair and maybe even some “I told you so’s.”

We too have been confined and isolated, and for a good bit longer.

We have had lots of time to consider and reconsider things as we have been away from the physical Church, away from one another, separated (?) from the Body of Christ. So, we may actually share a lot in common with the disciples on that first Easter evening.

SOLUTIONS:

Looking back over that folder, I realized what I had saved were articles about: the meaning of “Church,” going “back” to Church, and the “future” of Church, and a lot about what we should be doing liturgically, pastorally, and technologically. There was a lot to consider because, for 2000 years, ever since that fateful week in Jerusalem, the Church had been gathering together, sharing fellowship, offering prayers, and receiving the sacraments—more or less uninterrupted.

Then BAM! All that stopped, March 2021.

Here are a few of the ideas that I picked out from the folder about what we should be doing:

1) On one extreme, there was the dangerous suggestion that we keep things going as normal. Thankfully, this was mostly suggested *outside* our denomination, but some said that the Church did not have to listen to secular governments, or that we were somehow immune to the virus, or that.... I don't know... I find it hard to make that argument out loud.....¹

Little else needs to be said about that suggestion, I think, other than what a difference it would have made if the disciples had adopted that line of thinking to on that 1st Easter Evening.

If Jesus' disciples had decided to throw caution to the wind, to go out and proclaim the Gospel on the streets, not caring about the dangers to their lives, they might get points for *bravado* and for misplaced courage. It would have been heroic in a certain sense, to trumpet the Gospel in the streets of Jerusalem.

And they undoubtedly would have been killed by Roman authorities on the lookout for such rabble-rousing.

Instead, the actual disciples possessed the good judgement, it seems, to know there would be time for that, time for acceptable risk, time for worthwhile risk, time for risk that would have some meaning behind it. Famously, of course, most of the disciples would, after lengthy ministries, meet their deaths for riskily proclaiming the Gospel across the Roman Empire.

We also have proof of the wisdom of the disciples' decision by how Jesus greeted them in our reading. He said: “Peace be with you” and he says it 3 times.² Jesus does not say “Why are you not going out there and getting yourselves killed to prove your faith in me?” Instead, he says: “Okay, you are right here, peace is here, it's okay. You are still together, still arguing; so, in fact, it's like I never left!

You have work to do and a lifetime to do it. My promise is that my peace will abide

¹ [A Further Word on Responding to a Pandemic - Diocese of Springfield \(episcopalspringfield.org\);
https://www.azdiocese.org/dfc/newsdetail_2/3201970](https://www.azdiocese.org/dfc/newsdetail_2/3201970)

² John 20.19, 20, 26.

with you always.”

2) Another suggestion from my file was on the other end of the spectrum. This advice was, as a response to the pandemic, to... do.... “Nothing.”

This was from Ephraim Radner—a notable Anglican priest and scholar—he, curiously, called for churches NOT to livestream, to NOT furiously try to incorporate technology into one’s ministries, but rather to let things be.

His point was nuanced: his intention was that we might then learn to pray alone, to use the prayer book as families, and to sing hymns together. Radner wrote “We might learn to become lonely (or finally admit that we already are) and to cry out. We might learn to *hunger* and *thirst* even for the Bread of Life, for the Body of Christ, as many have done over the centuries in this or that place of desolation or confinement.”³

Offered by someone in academia and not in the parish, it earned him the swift backlash of the Internet and I don’t know if that he would have suggested doing that for a full year.

3) The majority of suggestions instead put forth something in between: there was a resounding call to reimagine the Daily Office in all its glory with Morning Prayer as the cure! Then there were also calls for ‘drive-thru’ Eucharist, and parking lot services over the radio, and for communion wafers in plastic baggies, and more ZOOM options than one can possibly imagine.

4) The thing, finally, that most people landed on, including us, was: “Spiritual Communion”, the ancient and well-trod part of prayer book repackaged for this time. It’s been different and hard and not quite the same, but it’s worked, I would say,

SHIFT

I want to go back to the first two suggestions, the extreme ones, because they are more fun and how they might cast light on the future.

Both of these responses to the pandemic (to continue doing church, or to discontinue doing church) actually share something in common: they pretend like nothing happened, they have an air of denial about them, either a denial of science or a denial of the great wound that COVID has wrought.

³ <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2020/03/20/should-we-live-stream-worship-maybe-not/>

Again, imagine if the disciples had engaged in denial after the Resurrection. Imagine if they had been so spiritually super-charged as to go out on into the streets and forego their personal safety, or if they were so unaffected by Jesus' death that they just continued on their usual way.

It reminds me of a particularly bad sermon given on "Doubting Thomas Sunday" where the preacher said that Thomas should be *commended* for not being in the locked room because, unlike the rest of the disciples, it showed that he was spending his time feeding the poor, and clothing the naked, and proclaiming the Gospel.

According to this preacher, Thomas did not "need" the Resurrection to prove his faith, so he just acted like nothing had changed and kept up the work of ministry.

CONCLUSION

I prefer the story how it's presented, that the disciples were overwhelmed by Jesus' crucifixion; they were human beings, not saints or super-apostles, and because they were human, they were hiding, fearful, scared.

Eventually, they would muddle through and come up with a plan. Like us with COVID, they figured out how to ZOOM and how to wear masks and how to join together in different ways and to see one another and to feel each other's pain and rejoice in and out of their suffering.

I think our reaction is pretty close to the disciples: do the best you can, make sure you are together and in community,
know it's okay to argue,
it's okay to be sad,
and it's okay to doubt.

The pandemic has been a test of faith that we would rather have not had. But you did it, you did not ignore the great collective hurt and you did not run away and pretend like nothing happened.

But instead, in the end, we trusted that Jesus will show up through locked doors, that Jesus will show up in our lives and meet us where we are, even during tremendous pain and misery, and will come and offer up these words to us all: "Peace be with you."

AMEN

