

BRING ME A HIGHER LOVE
7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER – ASCENSION PROPER – MAY 24, 2020
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Which day this spring did everything really began to unravel for me?

It was March 13th. That was the day I was planning to go to someone's home,
and they asked me to bring socks, because I'd need to take my shoes off
in case I was dragging a virus around on the bottom of my feet.

No problem, of course, but this was not normal.

As we have lived through this remarkable spring,

our experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been uniform.

For me, this spring has mostly been a very weird disruption in my routine.

For some, thought, the days have been filled with life and death encounters.

For others, this time has been one of anxiety, grief and disappointment.

All of these realities are true for those of us in the midst of them.

What were we supposed to do in this strange landscape?

Some did acts of heroism, said words of hope, and brought people together.

Some did acts of stupidity, said words of bitterness,
and divided people into warring camps.

As spring turns to summer, we – individually, nationally, and globally –

need to figure out how to live NOW, when so very much is different.

However, we each, individually, also haven't changed much:

the needs, habits, preferences, and dreams we had in, say, January,

remain part of us, even if our plans for the future have totally unraveled.

Once again, today looks a lot like the past.

Jesus and his followers had a simple but powerful life of ministry

of preaching about a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins,

of healing, feeding, blessing, doing what they did day after day.

One spring day, it all really began to unravel.

For some people in Jerusalem, the crucifixion of an itinerant peasant rabbi

meant primarily some really weird things happened around them.

For Jesus there was a life and death encounter with tyranny.

For his disciples, there was anxiety, grief and disappointment.

What were they supposed to do in this strange landscape?

Mary and the other women stood heroically by the cross as Jesus died.

Peter gave into his fear and denied his Lord three times;

and most of the disciples locked themselves in a room in anxiety and grief.

Two disciples walked to Emmaus and told a stranger of their disappointment.

Their needs, habits, preferences, and dreams were still part of them,

and Jesus of Nazareth hadn't saved them after all.

Then - ZIP-A-DEE-DOO-DAH! JESUS IS RAISED FROM THE DEAD!

Everything's OK now. He's back, he'll take care of everything like he did before.

We can go back to the way things were! But, wait, what?

He's leaving again? Ah, man, he's ascended far above all heavens.

He's with the Father. Yay for him. What about us? NOW what?

Now what, indeed.

So much of the disciples' world was the same: tyrants were still tyranting;
diseases were still infecting; poverty was still debilitating.

One thing had happened that changed everything for them:
as Jesus left, he had blessed them.

They had been blessed by the one who had conquered death,
by the one who could no longer be stopped by any earthly ruler and authority.

In blessing them, Jesus bestowed the overwhelming greatness
of God's power and set it to work within and among believers.

He blessed them with his Easter power, his ZIP-A-DEE-DOO-DAH power,
the power to walk right into the midst of the unraveling
and do God's preaching about a change of heart and life,
the healing, the blessing; to do themselves what he had done.

And, by cracky, they got up and did it. They changed the world.

At first, the followers of Jesus didn't do it with political power:
no armies, no legislation, not even any special buildings.

They did it person to person, at great personal peril.

They did it in homes and catacombs and other secret places
until they were captured, martyred by mobs, exiled by emperors,
felled by hardship. They suffered mightily, yet, as Sirach puts it,
they weren't timid about anything; they did not turn coward,
because the Lord was their hope.

Even in adversity, the Lord lifted up their spirit, gave light to their eyes,
and healed them for life – Eternal life, the life of the Eternal One,
a life bringing blessing to others in the midst of many, many troubles.

These Christians changed the world so completely that one day
being a Christian started being politically necessary instead of suspect,
and from the 5th Century on in the Latin West,
the Cross of Christ became a sign of privilege and power.

This was Christendom, which fostered things like the Spanish Inquisition.

Everyone in Western culture was aligned, at least nominally, with a church.

Governments could and did legislate the tenets of Christian faith
and impose them on everyone.

For better or for worse, in the late 20th Century, Christendom began to collapse.

Beginning with us Boomers, people – including me for a while – turned away
from the Church and found other ways to be spiritual.

Even today, though, politicians use religion as a political tool,
as they did in the 5th Century, the 1500s, and the 50s.

The collapse of Christendom means that Christians today
we can more easily see that we are in the same kind of world
the first disciples were in after they finished watching Jesus leave.

Truths that were always around us, but hidden from us by years of prosperity,
have broken into the open because of the pandemic.¹

We are forced to see that the truly essential people in our society,
those who enable us to live from day to day are not financial wizards, talk show hosts, or athletes,
but those who grow our food, stock our shelves, and heal our bodies.

¹ Many of the following thoughts come from reading a report by Alex Evans, Casper ter Kuile, and Ivor Williams, *This, Too, Shall Pass*. <https://www.collectivepsychology.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/This-Too-Shall-Pass.pdf>.

Yet, they are often the lowest paid, least visible, and most vulnerable of us.

We are forced to deal with inconvenient people we'd rather ignore:
 the people in prisons, shanty towns, and refugee camps,
 indigenous people in towns with no medical care,
 all of which are nothing less than incubators of new infections.

These truths about human lives and their suffering
 must and will impact us in our globalized interdependence.

Whether we like it or not, we're all in this together with them.

We can't wish away physics,
 and the vast majority of us cannot isolate ourselves into utter safety;
 we long ago stopped building our own houses, growing our own food,
 carving out our own roads, and making our own medicines.

Indeed, even those who are deeply isolated have gotten the COVID-19 virus.

A story in today's paper reported that the virus has infected people
 in a remote village in the Amazon rainforest –
 and they have no medical care. So the disease will simply spread.²

People can, and most recently have, reacted strongly against these revealed truths,
 blaming those who differ from them,

demanding a return to their preferred version of normal,
 seemingly willing to pattern themselves after Cain,
 Adam and Eve's cursed son, who insisted he was not his brother's keeper.

Just as in Jesus' time, we, like Cain,
 can certainly do our worst to each other, using the age-old tools
 of scarcity, injustice, violence and tribalism until our planet collapses.

Humanity was not created to live cursed lives, but blessed ones.

In the midst of things unraveling around us, we are blessed,
 blessed, as Ephesians says, with a power
 conferred by the energy of God's powerful strength.

God's power raised Christ from the dead.

Then and now, this power, the power of divine love,
 is far above every ruler and authority and power.

This higher love will not be stopped by us

and our Cain-like blaming, shaming, framing, or maiming of each other,
 Instead of asking why God brought this pandemic on us, why he's doing this to us,
 we should be asking what we've been doing to each other, to our planet.

Instead of flinching away from the revealed truths of our troubled world,
 instead of expecting Jesus to take care of things while we sink back down
 into OUR version of normal based on our needs, habits,
 preferences, and dreams, let's face the truths, as Jesus always did,
 because, you know, the truth sets us free.

When we're free from fear, we are free to act, even when things unravel.

We can do what first disciples did and change the world
 through the overwhelming greatness of God's power
 that is working among us believers, the higher love of the ascended Christ that fills all things.

² David Biller and Renata Brito, *Virus seeps up path of least resistance in Brazil, where the Amazon forms, natives are ill-equipped*. Tampa Bay Times, May 24, 2020, p. A13

Bring me a higher love, Steve Winwood sang 34 years ago,
giving voice to my yearning for something more,
to be free from the lockdown in the hard heart of Cain our culture is in.

Bring me a higher love gave this Boomer words,
as I turned from the trend of my generation,
and started going back to church because I had the sneaking suspicion
that God cared about me and everyone and everything else, too.

Bring me a higher love was my prayer back then, and it's a great prayer for now.
Bring me a higher love, that of the one who loves us to death and beyond death,
and as he ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things,
gave us the blessing of the power that is above every ruler and authority,
God's overwhelming power to preach to change hearts and lives
for the forgiveness of our sins, to heal, to forgive, to bless.

In so doing, we share in the divine nature of our loving God.

Bring me a higher love.

O, Lord, bring us the higher love inside your heart, and put it inside of ours.

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

Almighty God, your blessed Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things. Mercifully give us faith to trust that, as he promised, he abides with us on earth to the end of time, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

SIRACH 34:14-20

The spirit of those who fear the Lord will live, because their hope is in the one who saves them. Those who fear the Lord won't be timid about anything; they will never turn coward, because the Lord is their hope. The souls of those who fear the Lord are favored. To whom do they look? And who is their support? The Lord's eyes are upon those who love him. The Lord is a powerful shield, a strong support, a shelter from the heat, a shade from the midday sun, a guard against stumbling, and a help against falling; one who lifts up the spirit, one who gives light to the eyes, and one who gives healing for life and blessing.

PSALM 121

- I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?
- My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.**
- He will not let your foot be moved and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.
- Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep;**
- The LORD himself watches over you; the LORD is your shade at your right hand,
- So that the sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.**
- The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; it is he who shall keep you safe.
- The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in,
from this time forth for evermore.**

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, this is the reason that I don't stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us believers. This power is conferred by the energy of God's powerful strength. God's power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and sat him at God's right side in the heavens, far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power, any power that might be named not only now but in the future. God put everything under Christ's feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.

LUKE 24:44-53

Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I'm sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power."

He led them out as far as Bethany, where he lifted his hands and blessed them. As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God.

SERMON HYMN: *Come Away to the Skies*

BLESSING: The God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth, who walks where least expected, who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the distressed, and whom death could not control, now sends you out to announce with your lives that the Lord is risen indeed. Go, you are blessed in the name of our Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.