

“A Helpful and Instructive Response to Trauma”

Luke 24:36–48

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At first glance, when we read the story from Luke 24, it may seem like the disciples are a bunch of dimwits, like most of the characters on “Gilligan’s Island” (for those old enough to understand the reference). This often seems to be the case in the Gospels. Jesus tells them the greatest among them will be those willing to serve, and they proceed to argue about who can sit at his right and left in glory. Jesus tells them he must suffer, die and then be raised, and they tell him he is out of his mind. He asks them to stay with him as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane and they fall asleep. Perhaps Larry, Moe and Curly are a better comparison (again for those old enough to understand).

In today’s reading from Luke, they have been told by Mary Magdalene and some other women that the tomb is empty and that two men in dazzling clothes have said that Jesus has risen, just as he told them he would, but they dismiss this as an idle tale. Two of them have interacted with Jesus on the way to Emmaus, not recognizing him until sharing a meal with him. Now, he shows up and offers them a word of peace and they are frightened out of their skin. They think he is a ghost. He assures them he is not, he invites them to touch him and shares a meal with them, but they still disbelieve and wonder even in their joy.

What is wrong with these people? Why can’t they realize what has happened? Well, before we become too critical of them, we might want to consider what they have been through and how this experience might shape their understanding and ability to embrace the good news. They have been through a traumatic experience with Jesus’ death on a cross, they have been immobilized by grief. And when this happens, it is difficult to put one foot in front of another.

My mother died with a cerebral aneurysm at forty-eight. I was twenty-seven at the time, Dana and I had been married less than a year and were living in Danville, Virginia. We got the call about what had happened, she was in ICU, having lost the ability to speak and right-side functions. So, we

drove through the night to Louisville, Kentucky, where she lived, and spent a few days there. It was obvious that she would either die or live an incredibly diminished life.

The former happened three weeks later, somewhat mercifully, all things considered, and we went back for the funeral. My mentor led the service and I am sure it was appropriate and helpful. But I cannot tell you anything about it. My only memory of the day is that there was wet snow at the cemetery. Dana was there, of course, I felt loved and supported, and I remember waiting for my Aunt Bobby from England to arrive, but otherwise, I have no idea what was said and done.

Grief has a way of putting us in a fog. It is a kind of emotional shock that protects us. And that's where I was. It's where most of us have been at some point. It's where we all are now, after more than a year of a pandemic inspiring fear, taking life, damaging an economy and isolating us. We are all walking around in a fog, trying to make sense of reality, struggling to believe the hope that is right before us.

This kind of reaction to trauma is natural, the disciples are not dimwits, they are just like this. This reality, by itself, is helpful — we are not alone in our struggles. But Jesus' reaction to the disciples is also instructive. It highlights what we need in a time like this, not just from Jesus but from one another as well.

One thing Jesus does is allow space for the disciples' fear and confusion. He does not judge them harshly for not immediately moving on to joy. He offers a word of peace when he first joins them. When they respond in fear, thinking he is a ghost, he does ask why they are afraid and full of doubt, but he does so in a gentle way. Then, he invites them to look at his wounds and touch him — ghosts don't have flesh and bones. He even shares a meal with them, something ghosts do not do. He is trying to calm them. He understands why they are in a fog. He does not judge or attack them but gives them time and space to heal so that eventually they can move on to hope.

This is what we need when we are in trauma and full of grief, we need time and space to heal. When we have lost a loved one, when we have experienced a sudden crisis, as we have navigated this year of fear and isolation, we need time and space to heal, and in the process, to be out of

sorts, because this is how grief and trauma work. This may sound obvious, but it is not something we always find, even in the church.

I remember being jolted by the insensitivity of a congregant's comment in another setting. I had just led a funeral service for a man in the church about my age. He had two young children about the ages of our children. He had stopped by the church office about six months earlier on the way home from seeing his doctor. The feared diagnosis of cancer had been confirmed, he had not yet told his wife, and he wanted some help in processing things before he told her.

I offered what help I could, as did the church over time, and the medical people involved did too, but six months later he died. The service had been heavy, though uplifting, and it was on a Sunday afternoon, so I was already running low on energy. As I walked by another congregant in our parking lot, one who did not know the man who died and thus had not attended the service, she said, "That's not a very happy look. Where is your smile?"

I did not say what I was thinking, thank goodness! I explained why I didn't have a sweet Jesus smile on my face. But she looked at me in confusion, as if this was not an adequate answer. Perhaps it wasn't for her, but it was for Jesus. He understands our experience. He allows us to be out of sorts. And even though we struggle at times to do so, he calls us to follow his example of allowing each other time and space for healing. In the words of a Ken Medema song, "If this (as in the church) is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?"

Jesus allows disciples struggling with the trauma of having just witnessed his death space to feel what they are feeling — fear, confusion, doubt, grief. We are called to offer the same space to each other.

But Jesus doesn't stop here. He also offers words of instruction and explanation for what has happened and why they have reason for hope. They have had every reason in the world to experience deep sadness. He has died, and seemingly with his death, they have lost everything they care about. But somehow there is still cause for hope. He has been raised. All of this was part of the plan, as revealed in scripture, he tries to explain as calmly as he can, so they will be able to hear. The Messiah had to suffer and die, and then

be raised on the third day to provide forgiveness, healing and hope. Now he has been raised!

J. R. R. Tolkien coined the term “eucatastrophe” to describe the sudden turn toward joy and salvation at a point in the plot when all seems to be lost. It is what happens in much of his writing. As the forces of evil seem destined to win, the eagles come flying over the hill to save everyone, a ghost army arrives to save the day in a battle, a deeply troubled character ends up destroying the evil ring and saving the world. Eucatastrophe — a good, sudden event — saves the day. This is what the resurrection is, this is what Easter is about; it may take time to absorb, but it is good news, wonderful news, and it is genuine and true.

It is a message the first disciples need to hear, as do we. We need time and space to grieve, but we also need a reason to hold on to hope, to believe in something better for this life and to embrace the possibility of a life to come. The latter shapes the former. If we believe that this life is not all there is, there is always cause for hope. But the message Jesus brings is that there is hope even in this life because God is always working to bring life out of death, hope out of despair, in every situation.

After the most profound kind of loss — the death of a spouse, parent or child; the end of a marriage, job or career; the loss of sight, hearing or the ability to drive — it often seems like life is over. But in time and in God’s grace, if we are open to the possibility, we experience a eucatastrophe, the resurrection of hope. We find a new love, a way of honoring a lost loved one, something else to fill our lives, a new ability. Our hope for eternal life is its own incomparable reality, but it is also a sign of how God is always at work — bringing life out of death.

There is one other thing Jesus offers his disciples in this story. He allows time and space for them to grieve, he gives them a reason for hope, and then he gives them something to do. “You are witnesses of these things,” he says, which means not only that they have seen that he is alive and thus realized there is hope, but that they are called to tell others about their experience.

This calling meets a need in the early church. Other people need to know about Jesus’ resurrection and the only way they can know is if someone

tells them. But this calling serves another purpose. It gets the disciples out of their heads and allows them to move toward others with a noble purpose. It gives them something to do, something meaningful to do. This will be just as much a part of the healing process as having time and space to grieve. There is a time to sit still and listen to our emotions, but there is also a time to get up and get moving.

I think of the handbell choir Music Made in Heaven which is referenced in an article in the latest issue of *First Foundations* and is providing the musical response to the sermon today. It is made up of people who have lost children, many of them from our church, and their music is an offering of gratitude for the lives of those children and a way of keeping their memories alive. The music is a gift to all who hear it, but making this music is also a venture of healing and hope for the choir. We need not sit in a room and simply absorb loss forever. We can get up and get busy doing something for others which brings us hope and healing in the process.

I also think of some friends and family members of gun violence victims, and those who have lost loved ones at the hands of law enforcement, whether through justified or unjustified actions. Some get stuck in grief and anger, seeking only blame and revenge. Our place is not to judge the suffering of others. Who knows how we might respond if we were in their shoes? But vengeance never heals anything.

Yet some of these folks throw themselves into helping others in similar pain and into efforts at reform, seeking justice rather than vengeance. For example, after the shooting at the Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, which took seventeen lives, many surviving students spent the year working for a safer nation. It is a much more productive path, it can make a difference for others, and it opens the door to healing for those who have known traumatic grief.

After allowing space for grief, Jesus gives us a reason for hope, and then he calls us to offer hope to others. May we heed his calling — for our own sake and that of the world around us!