

Whenever you or I undergo significant changes in our lives, we know there is a pattern at work. There is a “normal” or status quo that is interrupted by change and then there is adaptation to a “new normal.” You live in one community or one home for several years; then there is the chaos of moving; followed by adapting to a new community – finding the schools, the doctor, the church, the grocery store – building a new life. You raise children, watch them grow up, living through all those exquisite and excruciating years, and then you and they go through the chaos of them leaving – for college or work or marriage; and then you parents wake up to a “new normal” – life without the children at home in the same way they were before. You leave one job for another or you become unemployed; either way there is real disruption – who are you “between jobs?” and how do you live not knowing what’s next?; finally, there is an adjustment – to a new work culture; to unemployment; to early retirement.

Five years ago, I got married for the first time. Since the last time I had lived with another person was my sophomore year in college, this was something of an adjustment. Some new things have been terrific – among other things, my husband is a very skillful and creative cook, and I am thrilled by not having to come up with menus and shop for food. Other things are more difficult – my idea of getting relaxed for sleep is a CD of quiet music; his is putting on a DVD of a favorite movie, such as “The Hunt for Red October.” Along the way, we have both found our way to a “new normal.”

This phrase, the “new normal,” has become part of the cultural language this year as we have all adapted to the economic and social and political realities in the wake of the largest financial disruption in the U.S. since the Great Depression of the 1930’s. Many things we took for granted, plans or projections we had in place two or three years ago have been seriously disrupted, and we are still trying to adapt to a “new normal.” Maybe it is a less comfortable retirement or delayed retirement or unemployment for ourselves or our children; maybe we have made significant changes in how we spend money or time; maybe our business has had to significantly re-think what we are doing and how – whatever it is, I think we are all very familiar with the challenges of change and the struggle to adapt to a “new normal.”

This pattern is exactly what our gospel reading this morning from John is all about – adapting to the “new normal” of life after the Resurrection. So, imagine you have been a follower of Jesus of Nazareth for more or less three years. Your whole life has revolved around listening to him teach, watching him heal, thrilling to his vision of God’s realm (God’s kingdom) realized in your own life. But then, there was conflict with religious and political authorities, and Jesus was brutally executed. Suddenly, the life you had shared is over. The dream dies. But then, equally suddenly, the tomb where he was buried is empty and there are experiences of Jesus present in a new way. There is a “new normal” called “Resurrection.”

What do you do, followers of Jesus, after the Resurrection? The four gospels have two distinctly different (and frankly almost impossible to harmonize) traditions. Luke’s tradition is

that Jesus commands to disciples to remain in Jerusalem and wait for instructions. This leads fifty days later to Pentecost, the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit and the commission to begin the new movement, sharing the good news beginning from Jerusalem and into all the world. Mark and Matthew's tradition is just the opposite: the disciples are instructed to return to Galilee where they all came from, and there, according to Matthew, Jesus commissions them and ascends to heaven. John's gospel (curiously) has both! In Chapter 20, Jesus appears (on Easter and the week after) to the disciples in the Upper Room. There, he breathes on them the Holy Spirit and commissions them for work. At that point, the gospel comes to a very clear conclusion: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God."

But wait, there's more! Abruptly, there is another chapter – something like a coda in a symphony which concludes the work but has its own distinctive musical idea. Some scholars point out that the style of the writing in Chapter 21 is quite different from the rest of John's gospel, as though it might have been added by another hand or borrowed by John from another one of the gospels.

According to this story, what the disciples do after the Resurrection is go home – back to Galilee, back to the lake, and back to work. "I'm going fishing," Peter announces (not for recreation; this was his profession). "We'll go too," the others say, and they clamber in the boat for a night of fishing. As dawn is breaking, the disciples see a man on the beach. He calls out to them, asking whether they have any fish. No, they reply; the nets are empty. "Cast your nets on the other side," the man says. They do, and the catch is so big in nearly swamps the boat.

Curiously, Luke has already told this story, but in Luke puts it at the beginning as part of Jesus' call to Peter to become a disciple. In Luke's story, Peter is bringing his boat back to shore after a night of fishing with nothing to show for it. Jesus gets in the boat and tells Peter to go back out (which Peter knows is stupid because they've just been there and done that!). Out they go, the nets are cast, and the catch nearly swamps the boat.

Both versions are actually about the same thing: when Jesus is around, what was empty becomes full to overflowing. Life that was barren, empty of hope, devoid of meaning or purpose is now bursting with abundance. In John's story, the abundance of fish is followed by yet another mystery. When the astonished disciples are finished hauling in the fish, they bring the boat to shore and there they see that the man – the stranger, whom they now recognize – has a fire and fish and bread already cooking on it. When have they seen bread and fish in these hands before? Ah, yes. Loaves and fishes; a little bit of food feeds a huge crowd and the leftovers fill large baskets. Scarcity in *these* hands becomes abundance. "Come and have breakfast," he says, and the world shifts beneath their feet. They have just moved into the radically "new normal."

I think people became disciples of Jesus in the first century for the same reasons we do in the twenty-first. They were ... we are seekers. Looking for meaning in the midst of both the ordinary and the catastrophic. Looking for abundance in times of fear and anxiety and scarcity. Obviously, our lives are far more secure than the near-subsistence-level economy that Jesus and his followers knew. But emptiness haunts us whether we have a great deal or not much at all.

In these weeks after Easter, our lives are “back to normal” and we are already thinking about the next things marked on the *other* calendar we live by. The end of the school year, graduations, weddings, vacations -- these are the things we are beginning to think about. Meanwhile, here in worship, David and I are still trying to keep Easter alive through hymns and stories that continue the Easter message that Christ is risen indeed. And yet we may have our lingering thoughts: is all of this *true* and if it is, what difference does it make? Is this really a *new* normal we find ourselves in or is it just more of the same?

As I reflect on all of this, I find this gospel story about breakfast on the beach much more helpful than the story of Saul/Paul being knocked flat on his back by a literally blinding vision. The story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is intimidating for many of us ... at least it is for me. I’ve never had a blinding vision; I’ve never had a vision period; no burning bush, no voice from heaven. There are people, some of you perhaps, who have had vivid encounters with Christ in ways that have turned your lives inside out and brought you to faith. There are others of us who have come to faith (or rather who keep coming back to it again and again) because of moments in the midst of ordinary time when something extraordinary breaks through.

It may be as simple as watching the sun rise each morning, seeing the sunlight bring the world to life. It may be a moment of tenderness or compassion given or received. It may be a melody or song or symphony in which the beauty of sound reaches deep into our souls and makes us profoundly grateful to be alive. It may be reading a passage of scripture, a poem, and essay where words leap off the page and reach deeply into our souls. It may be witnessing a friend, a dear one, a neighbor triumph over pain or adversity, illness or physical challenge, and come out whole. Or it may be, as it was for these friends of Jesus, the very simple and profoundly ordinary act of sharing food, eating together, breaking bread. In moments like these, the ordinary breaks open and we see (with the eyes of our hearts) the goodness of God and sense in our souls the reality of God’s presence.

Resurrection is about the victory of life over death. Resurrection is the sign that God’s love for us and for everyone else and for the whole creation will triumph over every power that hurts or divides or destroys. God could come to us in mighty signs and wonders, but more often than not, God shows up in the very ordinary ... and even here, when people come together as community to be and become a sign of hope. Thanks be to God.