

At this time last year we were “sprinting” to keep up with what seemed like hour-to-hour changes and updates on pandemic conditions, protocols, and public health orders. It was hectic, but we thought we could keep on top of things – because this wasn’t going to go on for very long. . . . But then the first month stretched into another month, and another month – and it became clear that staying hyper alert and ready for anything would have been a good response if the pandemic was short-lived, but this was probably going to be a much longer haul. Instead of being in a “sprint” we found ourselves locked into marathon of unknown length. And we would need to pace ourselves differently in order to live with this pandemic, and being safer at home, and doing remote learning, and Zoom meetings, and wearing facemasks, and recording worship services, and about a million other things. We were all shocked and stunned by everything that had changed – and especially by how powerfully those changes had disrupted life as we had known it. We were grieving what we had lost, fearful of what would happen next, and upset that we seemed to have no control over anything.

All of our internal, emotional turmoil was pretty similar to what Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome had been going through since Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and burial. They had been grieving and wondering what they would do now that Jesus was dead. They would (understandably) have been fearful of what the Roman authorities, and the religious authorities, might do next to the followers of Jesus. They had wanted to at least properly anoint Jesus’ body – but with the Sabbath they’d had to wait. And by the third day after his death, they knew his body was already decaying – and the smell might be so bad they might not be able to handle it. But they would be even more upset if the stone at the tomb’s entrance proved to be too heavy for them to shift, leaving them unable to reach Jesus’ body. . . . The women were already on the edge of feeling overwhelmed and overwrought when they saw that someone had already moved the stone away from the entrance of the tomb. Who did that? And why did they leave it open like that?

They had to approach the tomb with caution. What if grave robbers were still there? When they looked inside the tomb they saw a young man in a white robe. No one they knew! He saw them and said, “Do not be alarmed” – right! Too late, they were already alarmed. And then they were shocked by his announcement that Jesus had been raised – and that he had gone ahead to Galilee. That the women needed to go and tell Jesus’ other disciples to meet him there. . . . What?! How?! NO! They were there with spices to anoint Jesus’ dead body – how could his body have been raised from the dead?! How could Jesus be alive and waiting for them in Galilee?! Who was this man in the tomb?! Why should they believe what he said?! What has he done with Jesus’ body?! This was

crazy! It was wrong! It was impossible! We can feel their terror, their amazement, their fear, their need to get away as fast as they can. Emotionally, the women had already been sprinting for days – now they were physically sprinting to get away from the tomb. But no matter how fast they sprint, they can't outrun the confusion and turmoil inside of them. What if Jesus WAS raised up from the dead?! What if Jesus IS in Galilee?! What should they do NOW?!

Obviously the women couldn't have kept running forever. They had to stop. They had to talk about what had happened at the tomb. They needed to think, to process, and to decide what to do next. They needed to tell the other disciples about it. They had to share what they had experienced – while also being open to what might be, what could happen next, to what still lay ahead of them. . . . If we label what they went through as the “Easter experience” – then it wasn't just what happened in that encounter with the unknown young man at the tomb. It was everything these followers of Jesus had *already been through* with Jesus – as well as how they would *continue to live with* Jesus and each other. The Easter experience is actually the on-going life of discipleship for all who follow Jesus.

In our reading from Acts, Peter has had an odd God-sent vision that led him to accept an invitation to travel to Caesarea to meet a Roman centurion named Cornelius who is a God-fearer who wants to listen and learn all that God has given Peter to share with him and his household. Now they all knew that was unlawful for Peter, a Jew, to associate with or to visit a Gentile – and yet it was God who had encouraged Peter to go to this Gentile household, to speak to these people who wanted to hear a word from God. Prior to this Peter had never dreamed that he would be asked to share his Easter experience, to talk about his on-going life of discipleship, with Gentiles! Nor could he have imagined that they would *want* to listen and learn more, and enter into this Easter experience for themselves! Peter had no idea this was where God would take him, or that God's Holy Spirit would subsequently be poured out upon these Gentiles. Peter was shocked and amazed, and surprised and perplexed because he thought he *already knew* all there was to know about being a follower of Jesus! But lo and behold, there was still so much *more* that God was opening up for him to learn and experience!

While Peter had been a follower of Jesus for years, our reading from First Corinthians was written by someone who had actively opposed and persecuted the followers of Jesus. Paul actually had to meet the risen Christ on the road to Damascus before he had a complete change of heart, mind, and soul, and could enter into the Easter experience himself. But after his conversion, Paul listened and learned from other believers, and then went out to share the good news that they had handed on to him. And unlike Peter, it was

always clear to Paul that God wanted him to actively seek out Gentiles everywhere he went, to share with them his Easter experience, his conversion to a life of discipleship.

In his letter to the believers in Corinth, we find Paul reminding them that the Easter experience is an on-going life of discipleship that started with twelve disciples following Jesus. And after God raised Jesus from death, those twelve – and more than five hundred other people – experienced being with Jesus again; and that was all long before Paul ever met the risen Christ. But those twelve disciples, and those more than five hundred other believers, and even Paul, all went on to share their experience of Christ in their lives with other people. Their “Easter experience” rippled on and entered the lives of more people, and then they shared their experience with more people, who shared their experience with more people, who shared their experience with more people, until eventually we were handed what all those people had come to know: that Christ died for our sins; he was buried; he was raised on the third day; and he appeared to his followers.

The Easter experience has been shared with us, to live in us, to be shared by us to others. It can be a shocking and surprising thing to realize that we stand in a long line of followers of Jesus who have handed this living gift along from generation to generation to generation, from nation to nation, from disciple to disciple. By God’s grace we will have not been given this gift in vain in our generation. We need to take this gift and share it with others, hand on what we have been handed. We need to share our own Easter experience and invite others to experience discipleship for themselves.

Amen.