

In the last year, so much of what is “usual” has been upended. From schools and dining in restaurants to packed stadiums and casual time spent with friends, every aspect of our lives has been touched by this pandemic. Including, of course, church. On what should be a normal Sunday morning with people packed pews, here we are, coming to you now for the 51st week online, a handful of people here to make the service possible, while you – the community of faith – worship from your homes.

While we have tried to maintain the same rhythms and rituals in our services, nonetheless, these times are anything but “usual”. And in our efforts to keep a firm grasp on some sense of normalcy, some pretty hilarious moments have emerged, caught on video as we, like everyone else, stream our services for all the world to see. There was the video of the vicar in England who had carefully surrounded himself with candles to create a sense of reverie while he led online worship, which ended with – you guessed it – him catching himself on fire shortly into the sermon. There’s the video of a minister leading worship over Zoom, streamed for all the world to see, when the “Mute” feature was for some reason disabled. One member is talking in her home to her husband for a good five minutes and no one can do anything to make her stop. Another video I enjoyed featured a woman leading worship when a ten-inch long centipede crawled across her foot while she was leading the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. She does a pretty incredible job of keeping it together, but you can see it in her eyes how terrified she actually is. And of course, for all of the pastors leading worship from their homes, before they could even return to the sanctuary, there are children running through screens, husbands accidentally knocking over cameras, make-shift pulpits falling over mid-sermon, and coo-coo clocks sounding off in the middle of gospel readings.

All caught on video, for all the world to see.

These are all wonderfully hilarious moments because, at their core, they are people trying to keep some sense of “normal” when life feels so far from it. And yet they remind us, again and again, that we are far from normal still, a year out. We are far from what is “usual”. And even as we begin to imagine what life on the other side of this pandemic might look like, even as we begin to imagine our isolation finding healing again in community, we get reminders to pause, to take a breath, and to wonder what “normal” God is calling us back to.

In our Gospel reading for today, we are faced with the story of Jesus personally upending the “normal” practices in the temple. Unlike in the other gospels, which include this story as part of Holy Week, right on the heels of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, John places this story right at the start of Jesus’ ministry. He has gone to Jerusalem for the Passover and made his way to the temple. But there he is unsettled by what is happening. He is angry. People are there selling animals that can be used for sacrifice in the temple, and because Roman coins, with their graven image of Caesar, could not enter the temple, people are changing money. This is the commerce and the money-changing taking place on the outskirts of the Temple. This is the activity which, in other Gospels, Jesus calls “a den of robbers” but here simply a marketplace.

It was, in a way, just business as usual for people preparing for Passover celebrations. It was, in essence, the “usual” way of doing things. And yet what was normal, provoked him. Angered him.

Biblical scholars have different theories about what angered Jesus in this story. Some argue that what Jesus calls out in his “cleansing” of the temple is not Judaism or its various forms of worship, but a system of exploitation levied through heavy tithes and taxes that essentially blocked equal access to the divine, to the point where the poor were kept outside the gates of the temple, forcing them into more and endless debt before they can approach God.

Others argue that what displeases Jesus is the compartmentalization of faith that renders the temple “sacred” and the home “secular.” Professor of New Testament, Amy Jill-Levine feels this latter view is a better interpretation, and she offers a compelling analogy from today’s reading to our contemporary Christian lives. She writes: “The church member sins during the workweek, either by doing what is wrong or by failing to do what is right. Then on Sunday morning, this same individual, perhaps convinced of [their] personal righteousness, heartily sings the hymns, happily shakes the hands of others, and generously puts a fifty-dollar bill in the collection plate. That makes the

church a den of robbers -- a cave of thieves. It becomes a safe place for those who are not truly repentant and who do not truly follow what Jesus asks. The church becomes a place of showboating, not of fishing for people.”

Perhaps Jesus was calling out practices that had become “normal” because they exploited people. Or perhaps Jesus was calling out the lack of authentic worship practices by people who preferred to compartmentalize their life between private and public. Either way, all point to a deeper and more unsettling truth about the one we call “Lord:” when it comes to our spiritual lives (both individual and collective), Jesus is not about “business as usual.” He is not a protector of the “usual” way of doing things. And he has no interest in propping up institutions of faith just because that is the way things have always been done.

“Destroy this temple,” he told those religious authorities, “and in three days I will raise it up.”

Destroy this system which has twisted worship into a form of commerce, and see what will come up in its place, he says. Destroy this temple, which has been built by Herod to pacify an oppressed people, and see what God can build in its place. Destroy these practices, Jesus tells them, and I will show you a sign of God’s presence that is with you right here, right now, without the barriers, without the unnecessary burdens.

Of course, Jesus is not only speaking of reforming temple practices. He is alluding to himself. To what he will endure. To how, though he will be killed, he will nonetheless rise up.

And yet...for any who know the end of this story, it won’t be quite the same. It won’t be Jesus “as usual”, as the people were accustomed to knowing him. According to Luke, after his resurrection, Jesus walked that Emmaus road with two of his disciples, and they did not recognize him – not until he broke bread after a long day’s journey. Even after, when the risen Christ appears to his disciples, more often they feel fear. They do not recognize him. This is not business as usual Jesus. This is resurrection-power Jesus. This is the Jesus who has been destroyed and yet triumphed over the grave, Jesus. This is a far cry from life as usual, Jesus.

In the coming weeks and months, hopefully we will find ourselves in a time when this long wilderness journey – this perpetual Holy Saturday we have been living through – will shift somewhat. Even now our Session here at Harvey Browne is beginning to imagine when we can open up a bit. When these pews can have people in them again. When some of the bustle and busyness of our vibrant church community can return. And we all long for that. We all pray for that and hope for that.

And yet this passage today reminds us that, for God, business as usual is a far cry from the kingdom of God. That there is no returning to “normal” and “life as usual” when you have been through the kind of pain and death we have endured. When you have suffered what it is to have life utterly destroyed around you. No, when you have been through something like this, it is a call to let the power of resurrection take over. To live into Jesus’ invitation to see something new rise up in place of what has been destroyed.

Like those disciples who first saw the resurrected Jesus, it may look unfamiliar. This resurrection power may frighten us or intimidate us because we long to simply fall back into the old patterns of “life as usual.” And yet, thanks be to God, we are more than cogs in a wheel. We are more than the rituals we have built around our worship and the traditions that we cling to.

We are children of the resurrection, followers of Christ. And with God’s help, we are invited to shape our lives accordingly.

So may we, in the coming weeks and months, imagine what might rise from this wilderness we have endured. Let us consider: how we will allow ourselves to become a community of resurrection and new life? How will we use what we have learned – about connecting with one another and connecting with God? How will we take the pain we have known – of loss, of isolation, of fear and longing – and connect ourselves more deeply with God’s people who endure similar burdens in this world? How will we allow all that we have endured to foster new life? To shape us into resurrection people?

May we trust in God’s power to offer life on the other side of the grave. May we trust in the Holy Spirit’s ability to breathe newness and possibility after so much has been destroyed. And may we put our faith in Jesus, the Word of life and our Way in the wilderness.

May it be so. Amen.