

The Covidian Exile & The Resurrection: Why Easter is Good News in a Socially Distant Age

John 20:1-18

CBC Ilderton

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Andrew Hall

The other evening, I was going for a brisk walk through the subdivision. I continually came across the same gentleman, until we finally spoke up to one another. As he moved over to the road and I was on the sidewalk, we exchanged pleasantries and then he said, with exasperation, “I can’t wait until this is all over!”

In a matter of a month, we have adopted a new every day language. Social distancing, PPEs, quarantine, self-isolation – these have become normal words on our lips. Our practices have changed, too. We try to avoid close personal contact with others by staying 2 metres apart; we line up outside of grocery stores and wait our turn to go inside; we see people out in public wearing gloves and facemasks – even to the bank! And this is the new normal.

In many ways, we are longing for normal to return. We want to go to work. We want to shop without restrictions on how many items we can purchase at once. But there are indications that ‘normal’ will look different.

Throughout history, major world events came along and reshaped society. The Great Depression. Two world wars. September 11th. And with each event, major societal shifts came. Income tax was the to be the temporary measure after WWI. Screening at airports and hockey arenas is now normal after 9/11. What the new normal will be after COVID-19 is yet to be seen.

In the Bible, major events also shaped the history of God’s people. First, the exodus became the event that shaped the story of Israel’s history. The other event is the resurrection of the Son of God. And in Christ, he brings together all the events of the Bible and reshapes our life stories. If major world events can reshape our lives, how can the resurrection of the Son of God reshape our lives in an age of social distancing?

Believe the Resurrection in Order to Understand (20:1-10)

It is still early and dark, and Mary Magdalene approaches the tomb to complete the burial preparations. But as she arrives, she finds the tomb is not sealed but open! She returns to the disciples. So Peter and John run off to the tomb, and John stops while Peter rushes in. What he sees is unmistakable evidence that Jesus’ body has not been stolen – the grave clothes are still there. No one would have taken the body without the grave clothes. But even more remarkable is the fact that the cloths that had covered Jesus’ head were now folded up and placed down all neatly.

As John looks at this scene, we are told in vv. 8-9 that he believed but he didn’t yet understand the Scripture. He was presented with the facts of the resurrection – a body missing, linens folded, an empty tomb – and he believed.

So often we want to understand things before we will believe. We want everything to make sense. We rationalize that if we can grasp how all the parts fit together then we can believe. But often understanding evades us. It is beyond our grasp. We look at the world today and we wonder, like the first disciples, “Where is God?” A world in chaos causes us to pause and reflect. We want to understand – is God here? Does he care? And for

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some, there is a resistance to believe because we cannot understand how all the pieces fit together.

There is a beauty in understanding. God has given us rational minds. He has given us a desire to think and create order rather than chaos. But God has also made us as creatures with limits. One of those limits is the limit of reason. Like Adam and Eve, we think that if we just had a bit more knowledge, we could be wise like God. The fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil looks so tasty. And we hear the whisper of the evil one saying, “Take. Eat. And you will be wise.”

What we want is to understand in order to believe. We want to figure things out because rationalism can be another means of control. If I know, I can control the situation. If I know, I can protect myself. If I know, I can be like God.

Anselm, one of the Church’s great thinkers has famously said: “For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe-that unless I believe I shall not understand.”

There is a realm of knowledge that is outside of mere rationalism. Some knowledge comes because of faith. You must believe in order to understand. Who could look at the world today and say, “Look at how God is at work”??? To the rational mind, things look out of control, evil, and confusing. To the rational mind, this virus and faith make no sense. But through the eyes of faith, we can see God at work. The misplaced hopes of this life have been stripped away. There are no live sporting events. The economy has slowed at an unprecedented pace. Our desire for luxurious items – trips, events – they are gone. Even on this weekend, our love of gathering with others has been removed from us.

Yet God is at work. I hear story after story of people reconnecting with their family. Spending time together and working through challenges, difficulties, and disappointments. The idols of old have been stripped away, and suddenly we are faced with our own mortality and fragility. Christians are figuring out ways to love one another – dropping off Easter goodies, checking in on the vulnerable, loving one another. And by this all people will know that we are Christ’s disciples.

But there must be eyes of faith in order to understand. Quarantine is just a reminder that isolation in this life from friends and family pales in comparison to an eternity of isolation apart from the God who made you. Dying alone, on a ventilator, is awful; and so is an eternity spent in separation from a God who sent his own Son to rescue you from sin and death. Do you want to understand? Do you want to see how God is reshaping our lives, our world? Believe. Then you will understand.

Enter into Grief to Find Joy (20:11-17)

As Mary now comes, we are told three times that she is weeping (20:11, 13, 15) and overcome with sorrow. As she enters, she sees two angels at either end of the slab where Jesus’ body had been laid.

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“Looking into the tomb, Mary sees two angels sitting, one at the head and another at the foot of where Jesus’ body had lain, as the mercy-seat that covered the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:18-21). The Holy of Holies, from which access was once prevented by a veil, is now thrown open. The two angels of the new mercy-seat cover an absence—the place where the body of Christ once lay. Where once they had covered the dead testament of stone tablets in their ‘coffin’ (the word used for ‘ark’ is also used in this sense, cf. Genesis 50:26), they now mark the open site of the resurrection of the living Word. The Scriptures are ‘opened’ as the risen Christ emerges from their once closed testimony.

A similar ‘resurrection’ occurs as Mary’s eyes are opened. Mary initially mistakes Christ for the gardener. The presence of a man and a woman in a garden sanctuary recalls Eden and the sudden awakening of transformative understanding for Mary parallels the opening of Adam and Eve’s eyes after the eating of the forbidden fruit in Genesis. Here the eyes of Mary—the loving one who is the heart of the Easter Church—are opened not to her nakedness and shame but to her glorious risen Lord.”

(Alistair Roberts, “The Politics of the Empty Tomb” - <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-the-empty-tomb-john-201-18/> last accessed April 12, 2020).

And here is why the Resurrection is good news in a socially distant age. Just as Mary is willing to enter into the place of Christ’s death, Christ will come to her in his life. As Mary enters the tomb in darkness, her soul is flooded with light. While she misunderstands the empty tomb and has grief, the divine presence is now closer than she ever could have imagined. She wonders where “my Lord” is, and yet the very thing Mary wanted – the personal presence of Jesus – is what she receives. She wants fellowship. She wants his presence. She comes in hopelessness and despair only to have the presence of God come and take away sin and death, despair and darkness, distance and alienation.

The good news of the resurrection is that the exile that we experience today – the Covidian exile – an exile where man and woman were sent out of the Garden that was protected by the flashing sword – is now overcome by the One in this garden (18:1, 19:41; 20:15) who went under the sword and died and rose again so that we could come back into his presence, hear him call us by name, and know his nearness forever!

But a strange thing happens. As Mary’s eyes are opened, it is as though she wants to embrace him, to cling to him, to never let his presence go. But Jesus does not allow her to embrace him (see 20:16-17). She cannot cling to his presence because he must ascend to the Father. In other words, if she clings to Jesus now, it won’t last. He cannot be held, controlled. But if Mary wants the very personal presence of Jesus, he must go to heaven and give his Spirit that will give all who trust in him the glorious joy of his presence forever!

And so the One who took on flesh and tabernacled among us (Jn. 1:14) is now the One who frees us from our alienation, our hopelessness, our distance, our separation that was created by sin. He calls us by name, just as he called Mary by name, and he welcomes us to be his children who were once in exile but now have been brought near.

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Just as COVID-19 will reshape our world and the way that we think, behave, shop, work, and live, an even greater event has shaped those who believe – the Resurrection of the Son of God. The exile of this age, the separation we feel is a tiny taste of eternity separated from the God who made us. But for all who believe, who trust in Christ, who look at his tomb and see that he has made the sacrifice that brings us back into the Garden presence of God by opening the Most Holy Place so that we can draw near, it is these ones who know that he has given his Spirit to dwell with us, in us, so that we are never alone. Christ became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory – the glory of the One and only, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14)! He is risen!