

Where are we? Where are we going?

The Message from April 11, 2021
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John 20: 19-29

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week... Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

On this Second Sunday of the Easter season, we hear the story that we often hear on this day, what's usually called, the story of Doubting Thomas. But I'm not going to talk about Thomas today, or about faith or doubt, or even resurrection. I'm going to talk about the moment in which the disciples find themselves – and that it's weird.

This story takes place on two days: the day of the resurrection, and then one week later. So this is just after Jesus entered Jerusalem and was betrayed, arrested, crucified, and then raised – and now he appears to them. Everything has changed.

There's no "normal" for the disciples to go back to— Jesus isn't around to follow anymore, *at least not in the same way*. They have to re-invent their work and their ministry. They have to re-imagine what it means to be a disciple going forward. Where do they go? What do they do? How do they organize? What even IS this movement anymore, without Jesus?

They are in a transition time— a transition from following Jesus in the flesh, to continuing his mission with his risen spirit. They are in an in-between time, a time of questions and doubts. And this time— it's weird.

Rev. Dr. Sarah Drummond, my friend and former Divinity school classmate, and the Founding Dean at Andover Newton Seminary, wrote a blog post a couple weeks ago about transitions. (Evidently I'm in Charge, "The Fog of Transition", 3/26/21) She wrote: "Transitions make people weird."

And she argues, we're all in a gigantic transition right now:

Transition weirdness is... a world-wide fog in which we're all trying to orient ourselves. We are starting to come out of the Covid-19 pandemic, but we aren't there yet. For more than a year... we have adjusted our habits, changed our work patterns, isolated ourselves where we could, and stressed ourselves sick where we couldn't. We have lost loved ones, weathered

a contentious election, and experienced a society-wide reawakening to the prevalence of racism. Now, we're trying to figure out the nature of "normal," because soon we're supposed to get back to it. We don't know how.

If transitions generally cause people to forget themselves, behave in ways that are out of character, and make bad choices, we all need to be on high-alert during this season, because transition is the water in which we are swimming. Whereas we can usually trust our instincts, during this time, it's more important for us to check them....

Transitions make people weird. The best we can do is watch our own choices especially closely, trusting that the weirdness is affecting us; and then treat others with tenderness and acceptance, knowing that it's affecting them, too.

We are all in a transition, and it's making us weird!

Just like the disciples, living between the resurrection, and what comes next, we, too, are in an in-between time. We're living between the maybe-sort-of ending of pandemic life, and whatever comes next. And it's weird— We are vaccinated, and not vaccinated. We are feeling confident, and feeling cautious. Deaths are falling, but cases are rising.

The Johns Hopkins University covid tracker designates Essex County as "very high risk", stating that "Indoor activities are very dangerous right now." And to "Avoid events with more than a handful of people." Hospitalizations in the county are up 33%, and cases up 15%. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/essex-massachusetts-covid-cases.html?referringSource=articleShare>

And yet—restaurants are full, kids are back to school full time, people are traveling all over on airplanes, and 25% of the county is fully vaccinated!

What do we do with all this?! We're in a transition, and it's weird.

We're supposed to get back to *normal* soon, but as Rev. Drummond notes, we don't know how to get there— or even what that is anymore.

On Wednesday, a New York Times article (4/7/21) wondered "What is normal life?" Saying, "For now, the in-between feeling persists, the feeling of being on the verge of something but not quite there yet."

It's an in-between time, a transition time— for everyone, but also, of course, for us as a church. It's a time between pandemic church life, and whatever version of "normal" is to come next. But we don't even know what that "normal" will be, or how exactly to get there. How are we to be the church now? What have we learned in this past year? What is most important to us, either because of its subtraction, or because of its addition?

And how are we to be the church when we are in very different places? Some of us are vaccinated, and some of us, like our kids, won't be for awhile. Some of us are eager to get worship back in the sanctuary, and some of us are not ready for in-person worship. Some of us can't stand worship on Zoom, and some of us love it. Some of us have found depth and connection in Zoom small groups, and some of us don't like it at all. Some of us feel that the connections of our community are in jeopardy, and some of us have found even greater connection. Some of us are worried that we will never go back to the sanctuary, and some of us are worried that Zoom will be taken away. And some of us have simply disappeared and not engaged – deciding to wait until things are "back to normal."

I have heard all of this expressed recently, and I imagine that we have many more feelings and experiences in all the places in between.

Not only have we experienced church so differently in this past year, but we all respond differently to trauma, loss, and risk. So much of this pandemic has been moving through loss, and managing risk. And we all do that in very different ways—because of our past experiences, our personalities, and our life situations.

One afternoon this fall, I stood in a school parking lot chatting with a neighbor as our kids participated in a program together. It was an outside activity, with masks required at all times. Not only that, but covid cases were relatively low in September. So even I- felt pretty comfortable about my daughter participating, and I have a pretty low tolerance for risk. And as you know, I've had the additional complication of having five households connected, with kids going back and forth. Everything we did, directly affected 12 other people.

As we stood there chatting, my neighbor said to me, "Oh, but Julie's kids won't be coming. They decided not to do it this year. Because of covid."

"Really?!" I said, incredulous. "They didn't want to do this outdoor, masked activity? Jeez!" I could hear the judgement in my voice. Perhaps because I felt relieved to know that there was someone even more cautious than me.

Then my neighbor turned to me— "Julie's husband died of cancer last year. You didn't know that? She said she just can't take more risk after that loss. So they are not doing much this year."

My stomach dropped.

I didn't know about her loss, and I was embarrassed at my gleeful judgment.

Meanwhile, a member of my extended family has continued going to the gym throughout the pandemic, even at the worst moments of the winter surge. One day I remarked to my partner, Jason: "Is she *insane*, going to the gym?! That's so dangerous right now! There's no way she's coming to our house!"

And Jason responded: "She was in tears the other day, she felt so isolated and lonely. You didn't know that? Going to the gym is sort of all she has right now. So she's decided to keep going, so she doesn't lose her mind."

My stomach dropped.

I didn't know about the depth of her isolation, and I was embarrassed at my gleeful judgment.

We do not know what each of us is holding— from deep grief, to isolation, to past trauma and loss. But those things shape our responses, our choices, and our needs.

So in this weird time, we just need to have compassion for one another, to treat each other with tenderness and acceptance, to honor our varied experiences, and to listen to one another without judgement. And as the body of Christ, we seek to hold all our many needs and hopes. A tall order, yes! But we've done hard things before.

And West Parish is uniquely and wonderfully gifted at caring for one another, and welcoming each person where they are. I believe that is one of our greatest strengths— and apparently you all do, too! Based on the Thriving Congregations survey that some of you took a few months ago, we are best at welcoming, including, and belonging. We think it's very important that our church is accessible and open to every person, no matter where we're from, what we believe, or who we are.

So we're in a weird transition time. What will our life together look like going forward? How are we to be the church now? When will we be back in the sanctuary? And how will we do that? What about music? Communion? Sunday School? Small groups? Coffee hour?

Honestly, we don't know for sure. Like every church, we are figuring this out as we go. Which is why we haven't said much about where we might be heading—and I am sorry for that, as I know it's caused some anxiety. We haven't made proclamations about our future, in large part, because it's so hard to make any plans! What will things look like next month? In the summer? In the fall? We're now able to make much better guesses, of course, with vaccinations rolling out, but our plans are still in process—and must be held lightly.

But here's what we are HOPING to do, starting in May, in 3 weeks: We hope to offer two services most Sundays—one in-person outside, and one in Zoom. Is it awesome to be splitting ourselves into two groups? No! But this is a weird in-between time, and this is a way to offer all of us a good, connected experience, no matter where we are. We will see how this two services idea goes, but maybe we'll do that for May, June and July.

Meanwhile, we have just formed a tech team that will be working on getting us set up to have hybrid worship. You may have heard that term, "hybrid worship"—which just means worship that is both in-person and online.

What we hope to do is this: to return to the sanctuary—yes, we will be back there! And we'll zoom that in-person service out to those of you at home, AND those of you on Zoom will be able to be seen and heard! So imagine about 35 of us in the sanctuary, sitting in the pews, and off to the side is a big monitor where we can see those of us at home. And because we can see and hear the folks on Zoom, someone unable to get to the sanctuary could even be the lay leader!

That's my dream, anyway. Why? Because then we leave no one behind. Then we'll have our in-person sanctuary worship, in our sacred space, with our pulpit and windows and organ and pews. AND those of us who are not yet ready to worship in-person, or those of us who live in other states, or those of us who have difficulty physically getting to church, or those of us who are travelling, can still participate in worship! And people wanting to visit West Parish, can do so easily from their homes, and then join us in-person when they are ready. (I am reading that this will be an important aspect of church outreach and welcome—people "church shopping" a virtual service first.)

Everything that I am seeing and reading and hearing about the future of the church is that offering some sort of virtual church is just a given. Every church is wrestling with how to do this, and what it means.

Last month I attended a webinar on hybrid church with Rev. Jim Keat who says: "After a year of splashing around in the deep end of online church, many congregations are looking towards the day when they can once again safely gather in person. As we return from these online spaces to our in person gatherings, what will we take with us? What will we leave behind? How will we integrate what we have learned and experienced into the future of what it means to be the church?"

This is a weird time, a transition time, and we're all affected by that weirdness—myself included! I am completely weird right now! But I am truly excited to ask these questions with all of you, and to continue to grow and learn and be the church in new ways! That is how we stay alive and vital and relevant and accessible.

And finally—I have heard fear and frustration from some of you recently. Fear that Zoom will end. Fear that we’re not in the sanctuary and will never get back there. Fear and frustration and worry about the state of our church. And while I don’t want anyone to feel fear and worry, I think we’ll all going to feel some of that in this uncertain and weird time.

But you know, I think these fears and frustrations are wonderful! Because all of the concerns and fears that I’ve heard about how we’ll worship, and where, and when—they all stem from a deep love for our life together, a deep valuing of worship. Isn’t that the best?!

Being a faith community – in whatever form it takes – is so important to us, that we are feeling its loss, or anticipating its loss, so deeply. Isn’t that amazing, that in this time of falling church attendance and declining religious affiliation, that we should so desperately want to remain connected! What a fabulous problem to have! Truly! What we are doing here, trying to be the people of God, really matters to us!

So maybe exactly how we do that is uncertain. Maybe exactly what church looks like is changing. Church is adapting to the pandemic and the post-pandemic world just like all organizations. But the core of our life will always remain: following Jesus, seeking God, caring for one another, and we will continue to do that wherever and however we gather. Thanks be to God!