

Order, Disorder, Reorder

Luke 24:13-35; Annie Dillard

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, April 26th, 2020

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”¹

Annie Dillard

Oh dear! I wonder if the quote from Annie Dillard caused offense this morning after a good number of us donned fancy festive Easter hats or bow ties on Easter Sunday. You looked wonderful by the way! What was it like to hear that? Should we really be wearing crash helmets, life preservers and grab some signal flares instead? Do we have “the foggiest idea what sort of power” we are evoking? The Christians who lived in the catacombs whom Dillard is referring to were those early followers of Christ who had to worship in hiding. The God they worshipped and the risky faith of service and compassion they practiced were so counter-cultural that these Christians became the target of persecution and crack-downs.

We now live in an era in which our religious practice is often ignored or has become so infused with the cultural assumptions and practices around it that we are always in danger of losing touch with the power and fervor of its own message. Annie Dillard is offering us the gift of shaking and waking us up which is particularly fitting at Easter time. We are most certainly not worshipping a “sleeping God” but a “waking God” who is indeed drawing us out “to where we can never return.” If we are truly evoking a power here within and around us that can raise the dead, watch out people!

However, I sense in us an understandable mix of energies during this pandemic. There are days when many of us want to retreat and feel exhausted from the anxiety that seems ever present in the system. Sometimes that is necessary. At other times, I sense the spring fever and urgency among us to find more ways to be, if not interactive, at least active. We want to help address the suffering that may yet increase in untold ways and struggle to know how and when to move forward.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

One way to think of our situation is as one of moving from a sense of order and routine to a disorder, to eventually make room for a kind of re-ordering experience.² We will continue to move through this pattern over and over again throughout this pandemic and beyond. We are working together as a church community and society to address the huge sense of disorder as people have become ill and died, many have lost jobs, mental health challenges are on the rise, schools and so many other public institutions are closed or changed to functioning on-line. We've all become "Zoomers" to connect. As we dream of days beyond this COVID-19 pandemic, we need to ask ourselves what we actually want that life to look like, what we find most valuable and want to abide.

For example, this past week marked the 50th anniversary of Earth Day at a time when the planet is actually getting a certain reprieve from pollution. This may be one of the few positive outcomes of this experience. (We planted fruit trees in honor of our parents). Are we committed to building on this healing in some appropriate way or will we quietly look away as environmental protections actually continue to be rolled back as we speak? As some of our school children cannot participate in on-line schooling for lack of resources, will we address societal inequities that leave some people unemployed or working hard and still not making ends meet? With minorities suffering more obviously and disproportionately during this health crisis, will we reset our priorities for funding? Will we undermine international efforts at collaboration and development or strengthen them knowing now more than ever that viruses don't care about borders and neither does God? What other assumptions have we been making that have now been called into question, inviting us to change our lives, our relationships with each other, to our economy, and our way of being church?

We face the urgent question of how we will name and not break faith with whatever those learnings are. Julio Vincent Gambuto wrote a challenging article entitled "Prepare for the Ultimate Gaslighting"³ to warn us against simply getting hoodwinked into a return into a consumer-oriented life aimed at soothing our overwhelming anxieties. Gaslighting means manipulating someone to doubt their own sanity. There will be countless offers of products and services and programs promising to make us feel better in a way that self-medicates and puts us in a trance. He is not

² Richard Rohr uses this sequence of order, disorder, reorder in his teaching in the *Living School*.

³ <https://forge.medium.com/prepare-for-the-ultimate-gaslighting-6a8ce3f0a0e0>

trying to say that our economy is outright evil but that we are in danger of forgetting about what this time has revealed to us about what truly matters, including our efforts to address the inequities that left people and the earth to suffer even before the pandemic struck. Gambuto calls this time, “the Great Pause” that has us stepping back and seeing what happens when we stop the frenzy of our lives and reach out to each other in compassion and solidarity. He is trying to make the point that we have the power and opportunity to choose differently around priorities of time, spending, health, well-being of the whole and our own family’s lives as we re-order our lives.

Our scripture passage from Luke offers us an example of how some early disciples deal with an experience of moving first from order to disorder. As they encounter the risen Christ, he then invites them into a reordering of their lives that re-anchors them in their faith and still leaves them transformed. Cleopas and an unnamed second person are on the road home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They represent all of us trying to follow Christ amidst the crucifixions and resurrections of life. They have just experienced the brutal murder of Jesus and heard the bizarre news that he has been raised from the dead. The risen Christ suddenly appears to them as a stranger and prompts them to articulate their experience, hopes and disappointments. They grapple with the question: How could Jesus have been “the one to redeem Israel (24:21),” if he was brutally murdered instead of inaugurating a new reign? The crucifixion turned their hopes and expectations upside down and left them in a place of disorder. They don’t quite trust rumors of resurrection. By returning to the presumed safety of their homes in Emmaus they seek shelter and comfort from all the struggle and anxiety that Jerusalem has represented.

Jesus is not exactly gentle by calling them “foolish” for being so shaken and uncertain. He goes through the salvation story of his people to emphasize that they are dealing with a God who liberates amidst suffering.⁴ He asks, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory (24:26)?” Dying to fear, hatred, scarcity and rising to love and compassion is the pattern of Christ’s life and it must become the pattern for our own lives. Jesus as the Christ dies because he loves so fervently. He desires to bring salvation (which means “healing”) to people mired in captivity of heart, soul, body, and mind. Even now as the resurrected one, Christ brings people together in solidarity beyond their boundaries and divisions. He will not force

⁴ Luke wrote most likely for Gentiles who were not as familiar with the salvation history of the Jews. This story is also a teaching tool to help them understand the broader context.

anyone and begins to walk ahead of Cleopas and his friend. It is up to them now to seek a deeper connection and awakening. And there is something burning in their hearts that compels them to say: “Stay with us” and invite him to a meal. A meal is precisely the setting in which Christ continuously manifests God’s message of mutual belonging. It offers an embodied way of experiencing who he is as the one who always gives himself away - blessed and broken in love - to empower others to embody this spirit and love.

The moment they recognize him in the familiar breaking of bread, this “stranger” they’d met on the road vanishes. It is not the time to cling to him in safety but to step back into their lives with renewed courage. After walking all these miles and despite the late hour, they immediately return to Jerusalem, the place of danger and uncertainty, to share their experience with their friends (Luke 24:33). Salvation or healing and liberation are, after all, never just about individuals but about the community. Having been reminded that they are part of the experience of the living God in our midst, the question now becomes how they will allow themselves to be broken, blessed and given while receiving the same gifts from others. By “being broken” I am referring here to an experience of letting go of our own protective armor, of moving beyond the betrayals, disappointments, and disorientations of our lives for the sake of love.

We are now the participants in God’s salvation/healing history by the way we trust in God’s love and live it even in trying circumstances such as these. Will we merely remove ourselves from the suffering and uncertainty around us in this time of disorder? Or will we allow the Holy Spirit to reorder our priorities and values around what really matters and abides as our hearts burn within us, thanks to Christ’s love?

I was struck by a PBS News Hour interview (April 24) with twenty-four-year-old KP Mendoza who is from an immigrant family and works as an ICU nurse in NYC. He has been tending to COVID-19 patients for the last 6 weeks, seeing more people die than most of us will in a life time, as he says. KP has been struggling with fluctuating emotions of feeling fearless and cowardly, confident and incompetent while tending to more people than usual with fewer tools at his disposal. He has become aware that death could also pick him and that getting the disease is virtually inevitable. He and his colleagues have even considered writing their wills. KP also increasingly sees his own

parents in the older patients he cares for and daily reminds himself of the need to risk sharing our love with each other.

KP neither sees himself as a hero nor does he want to become a martyr. He, too, loves life. He wants to do his work well as he cares for patients and doesn't want to see more people die. This young nurse remains committed to doing what it takes AND he wants to have a future. He also fervently hopes that we, as a society, will try to make this world a better place because of how much we have suffered. KP is calling on us to seek change, including addressing racial and income inequality and access to primary care. Wearing crash helmets, as Annie Dillard called it, is not about living in fear of God but a symbol of willingness to face adversity and transformation together. As he and his colleagues are putting on their proverbial crash helmets every day, the least we can do as a society is to spend the time assessing and committing to creating needed change.

KP's experience also reflects our Gospel story's invitation to learn to see Christ in every "stranger" we meet just as he is beginning to see loved ones in the people he serves. Christ teaches us that all love is embodied, incarnate and particular. As the waking God, he is calling on us to walk forward in faith to a new life from which we cannot return. We can trust that he is walking with us on the road, even through this "valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23) and disorder, as we allow ourselves to be blessed, broken, and fed beyond measure, offering love and presence to each other in God's new order. Thanks be to God.