

WE WILL BE CHANGED

John 20:1-18

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Avon Lake UCC
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Easter Sunday
(online only)

In every generation, there are events that serve as markers; we never forget them. Sometimes we call them defining moments. Unfortunately, these tend to be tragic events, though not exclusively so. Some of you remember V-E Day, the end of World War II. Some of us remember the moon landing. All of us who live in northeast Ohio will long remember LeBron and the rest of the Cavs bringing us our first NBA championship in 2016.

But time is also marked by disasters. The generation before me remembers Pearl Harbor. I am about the youngest to remember the assassination of John Kennedy, and my generation was also shaped by the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the riots at Kent State. Those in my children's generation will remember where they were when the Twin Towers went down. They'll remember, sadly, one school shooting after another.

And now this. We will all remember the first pandemic since 1918. We have all been changed because of coronavirus.

The question is "How will we change?" What kind of world will we have when things begin to return to normal? What kind of world do we want? How will we change?

Sometimes it takes a while for people to adjust to change. It's fascinating to read the stories of the first Easter in all four gospels. I'm so familiar with the story — as many of you are — that I assume I know it. But this year I went back and read each

one. (I had the time, after all.). I tried as hard as I could to set aside my preconceived notions.

When I think of the first Easter, I think about Easter sunrise services I've been to along the shores of Lake Erie. The crowd is quiet when we first gather, it's usually chilly in the dark. There's a sense of excited expectation as we all watch the sky. And then, when the sun appears, we all get louder. We burst with joy, we sing, we share refreshments. There is a dramatic shift in mood from dawn to sunrise. Somehow I think of that first Easter as happening in that way. First the mood is so solemn, heavy with grief and the unbelievably sad burden of those who loved Jesus the most preparing his body for burial. And then, the realization that he has been raised! Everything changes in an instant. Cue the trumpets, fill the scene with Easter lilies!

But of course it doesn't really happen that way. Not at all. The gospel writers give us words like these — great joy and amazement, but also terror, doubt, disbelief, and fear. So much fear. In one version, the disciples are huddled in their house in fear.

The first Easter does not produce as much joy as it does fear and confusion. "What do we do now?" Jesus' followers ask themselves. And let's not be quick to judge them. We have the benefit of knowing the whole story. There's no shock and surprise for us. And we didn't witness Jesus' violent death the way they did. Their doubt and their anxiety are understandable. It takes fifty days before Jesus' followers begin to change for the better. It takes another miracle, the miracle of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, to shape these grieving followers into a community that decides, finally then, to act like Jesus. To share their belongings and to share the good news.

Change takes a while. A caterpillar needs some time in the cocoon. When a caterpillar enters its chrysalis, it dissolves itself, quite literally, into liquid. In this state, what was a caterpillar and will be a butterfly is neither one nor the other, it's a sort of living soup. From this completely fluid state, new life is born.

We are beginning to see the light at the end of this coronavirus, stay-at-home tunnel we are in. Within a month or so, most likely, restrictions will begin to ease. It is time for us to begin to focus on this question, "How has this time and experience, this crisis changed us? How do we want our lives and our church and our community and our world to be when this is finally over?"

One of my best friends from college lives in Cincinnati. She spent all last year in cancer treatment. Thankfully she is doing well right now and we'd made plans to get together in early April. We were going to meet at a bed and breakfast for two days and catch up. Those plans had to be cancelled, so we settled for the next best thing - an online conversation last Sunday afternoon. In the course of the conversation, she said to me, "Kelly, cancer changed me in some good ways. I became aware, early on, that I had become a person who spent a lot of time being angry at the injustices of the world. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I was angry about that, too. But then I realized that anger was not going to help me get better; in fact, it would be an obstacle. I began working deliberately on replacing anger with gratitude and compassion and other positives." Janet never would have chosen cancer, but she decided that cancer would change her life for the better, and for good.

How do you want coronavirus to change your life for the better? It's a question I've been living with, but first, let me stop here and say this. It's important to

acknowledge that some people's lives have already changed in dramatically difficult ways. Loved ones are sick or have died. Businesses have been lost. Financial insecurity looms. People are struggling to maintain sobriety and to ward off depression. This crisis, like all crises, has affected those who are most vulnerable, whereas some who are more privileged are merely inconvenienced. All of that needs to be said. But it is also true that for many people, these last four weeks have created an opening to reflect on our lives in new and different ways.

Have you seen this reading? I know it's been posted in various places. It was written by a former teacher and chaplain named Kitty O'Meara, who lives in Wisconsin. It is entitled, "And People Stayed Home."

And people stayed home
and read books and listened
and rested and exercised
and made art and played
and learned new ways of being
and stopped
and listened deeper
someone meditated
someone prayed
someone danced
someone met their shadow
and people began to think differently

and people healed
and in the absence of people who lived in ignorant ways,
dangerous, meaningless and heartless,
even the earth began to heal
and when the danger ended
and people found each other
grieved for the dead people
and they made new choices
and dreamed of new visions
and created new ways of life
and healed the earth completely
just as they were healed themselves.

What have you personally appreciated in these days that you don't want to lose?
A slower pace of life? More time with family? More nature, more walks? One church member wrote me last week, saying, "Being apart from the church has made me realize how important it is to us." Have you grown a deeper appreciation for certain relationships in your life?

And what do we want to change about the world around us, as a result of this crisis? I know that we miss so many things and are eager to get back to sports and concerts and hugging...but do we want everything to go back to the way things were before? What if this crisis is an opportunity to hit the reset button on things that were not right, things that haven't been right for a long time.

One commentator puts it this way: “For now, the coronavirus pandemic is an epic of sorrow, and has many mortal months still to run. But in the midst of our suffering, our grief for loved ones lost, our loneliness in social isolation, we have a chance to re-engineer our world. Some of the greatest advances in American history — liberation of slaves, Social Security, robust clean air and water mandates — were birthed by disaster.”

People in India are seeing the Himalayan mountains for the first time in decades, because air pollution has cleared - could this be a chance to hit the reset button for God’s beloved creation?

How does the resurrection become real for all people, for every created thing? How do we show the world that love has won, that love has prevailed over death and evil and hatred? How do we live as people who believe that love is more important than greed? What do we want to change? What do we believe God wants us to change?

“Perhaps we will appreciate the value of direct face-to-face contact more. Perhaps the Europeans who have sung together from their balconies or applauded together for their medical workers, and the Americans who came out to sing or dance on their suburban blocks, will have a different sense of belonging. Perhaps we will find a new respect for the workers who produce our food and those who bring it to our tables.”*

Writing about what the resurrection means to him, the apostle Paul says, “We will all be changed.” What do we want our children and grandchildren to remember about this time? Will they remember, that when the world emerged from its tomb of fear, from its cocoon of shelter, that there was a rebirth of love and neighborliness? That there

was a strong desire to act in the public common good? Will they remember that this is when the world shifted away from the destruction of creation and towards its protection? Will we rebuild our cities, making them again beautiful places where children thrive and all God's people have homes and food? Will we be Easter people?

We can, and we will, through the power of the One who changed the story of Good Friday to the story of Easter. We WILL overcome evil with good. We can do all things through the risen Christ who strengthens us. We are Easter people, and this is the good news in which we hope and love and live.

(Quotes from Timothy Egan and Rebecca Solnit)