

## Peace Be With You

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, May 3, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 24:35-43](#) and [John 20:19-29](#)

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“Thomas wasn’t doubting. Thomas was grieving.” I wrote that note in the margins of something I was reading a couple weeks ago. I stumbled across it on Thursday, a little surprised by the note – a stray thought at the time I wrote it, and now I think perhaps an important insight for us in this time as we continue our examination of the things said by the resurrected Christ.

In 24 days, it will have been two years since my dear friend Lizann died. In many ways, my life hasn’t changed. I don’t visit Sebastopol (where she lived) as often as I used to, and there are times when I wish I could share an experience or benefit from her insights as I process some feelings, but most days, the only difference is that there is a friend-shaped hole in my universe. The reassurance that the personification of unconditional love for me has disappeared, and that’s what I miss the most. And that’s why I continue to grieve her death.

Grief comes because of loss, and right now, we are all experiencing loss. Our losses differ. Some have lost the physical contact of hugs with family and friends. Some have lost jobs. Some have lost a sense of invulnerability. Some are feeling the loss of democracy, and some are feeling a loss of faith in democracy. Some have lost loved ones to COVID-19. As a nation, we have lost over 67,000 people to the disease; almost a quarter million deaths globally.<sup>1</sup>

David Kessler, perhaps the world’s foremost expert on grief, says, “We’re feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn’t feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.”<sup>2</sup>

We are also experiencing anticipatory grief. This is a feeling we get when the future is uncertain. Kessler explains, “Usually it centers on death. We feel it when someone gets a dire diagnosis or when we have a normal thought that we will lose a parent someday.”<sup>3</sup> We are experiencing anticipatory grief because we sense that there is something bad out there, something we can’t see, lurking. This shatters our sense of safety, so we are experiencing a loss of safety. I don’t think that in my lifetime we have experienced such a global sense of

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<sup>1</sup> *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:2019%E2%80%932020\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic\\_data](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:2019%E2%80%932020_coronavirus_pandemic_data) (accessed 2 May 2020, 9:54 p.m. PDT).

<sup>2</sup> Scott Berinato, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief,” *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>, (posted 23 March 2020, accessed 25 March 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

losing our safety. Perhaps during the Cuban missile crisis, but even then, I'm not sure how global that loss of a sense of safety was. The bottom line is, we are grieving. We are grieving our personal losses and we are grieving this global loss of a sense of safety.

Kessler points out how we can see, in response to these losses, the five stages of grief he and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross identified years ago. (An aside: I don't particularly like the term "stages." It makes it sound as if grief is an orderly progression, and it is much messier than that. Still, these five stages are definitely part of grieving, as jumbled and messy as they can get.) "There's denial ...: This virus won't affect us. There's anger: You're making me stay home and taking away my activities. There's bargaining: Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right? There's sadness: I don't know when this will end. And finally there's acceptance: This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed. Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies. We find control in acceptance. I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually."<sup>4</sup>

These stages don't map so well with anticipatory grief. That's because anticipatory grief is the mind taking us into the future and imagining the worst, imagining losses that haven't happened. The way to calm the panicky energy of anticipatory grief (not to stop it, but to calm it) is to return to the present. Practicing meditation and mindfulness are certainly ways to be grounded in the present. Another way is much simpler: noticing and naming five things you can see, noticing and naming five things you can hear, and noticing and naming five things you can feel. I can see the computer; I can see the desk; I can see my hand; and so forth. I can hear my voice; I can hear the hum of the computer fan; I'd have to be silent for a moment to notice what else I can hear. I can feel the paper in my hand; I can feel my feet in my shoes; I can feel the chair against my back; and so forth. When we use a technique like this to return to the present, we realize that nothing we've imagined in our anticipatory grief has happened. We are okay.

Kessler also suggests that this is a good time to stock up on compassion.<sup>5</sup> Our fears and our griefs manifest in different ways. We can get snippy with the people we love. We can find ourselves tearing up easily. If there is a global sense of grief, and I think there is, we need to be compassionate with each other and with ourselves.

Perhaps one way to interpret the greeting of the resurrected Jesus, "Peace be with you," is to see it as act of compassion. In Luke's gospel it seems to be a compassionate (though failed) attempt to preemptively keep the disciples from freaking out. The resurrected Jesus tells them, "Peace be with you," and, as Luke puts it, "They were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost." In John's gospel it's all a bit gentler. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." The following week, he returned. This time Thomas was there. Again, Jesus appears and says, "Peace be with you."

Peace be with you. As I prepared the sermon, I realize that when I write a note to someone who is grieving or a note on the anniversary of the death of a loved one, I find myself praying for peace in the heart and mind of the bereaved. Peace be with you.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

I know that the peace of Christ is much more than this. I know that on Sunday morning when we offer each other the ancient greeting of the church, “The peace of Christ be with you,” we are wishing for each other peace for the grieving heart – and much, much more. And yet, in this moment, as we deal with our collective grief, my wish for you and for me is this peace.

A manifestation of this peace, for me at least, is stillness. Actually, I’m not sure which comes first, the stillness or the peace. Or perhaps there’s a positive feedback loop where stillness leads to peace leads to stillness leads to peace leads to stillness leads to peace. And so I find myself pondering, how can I create space for that stillness?

As silly as it may sound, I think of Marie Kondo, and how in her Netflix series she begins her process by kneeling on the floor and touching the floor with her hands and being still, greeting the space in which she will work. I wonder if some ritual like this might help me. She seems to find the stillness amidst the chaos of the households where she works. And in finding that stillness, perhaps I can prepare myself for the sixth stage of grief.

The sixth stage is a stage that Kessler identified sometime after Kübler-Ross died. He calls this sixth stage, Meaning. At some point we will find meaning in the midst of our grief, perhaps even because of our grief. Perhaps our grief is inviting us to reflect on what is truly essential in our lives. Perhaps our grief is inviting us to remember the importance of love and compassion. Perhaps our grief will lead us somewhere new and profound. We don’t need to rush to Meaning. It will come in its time. For now, seeking the peace of Christ and offering each other the peace of Christ is probably enough. Peace be with you. Amen.