

What Could 'Different' Look Like?

Rev. Rick Bergh

In grief, you likely spend most of your time and energy in one of two places: the past or the future, toggling between them. But the challenge is always to stay present and live in the moment.

*Grief is your reaction to what you miss that you no longer have that used to be.
Grief is your reaction to what you miss that you never had but always hoped for.*

Here's the bottom line – grief is *missing*. And right now, the world is grieving many losses as a result of COVID -19. We're missing. Hugs, meals shared, a caress on the cheek, family celebrations, AA meetings, rough housing with grandkids, a pint with a friend, an early morning coffee at Starbucks, a Bible study or worship service. Maybe we're missing *someone* – we couldn't meet together as family to grieve that loss at their funeral. They disappeared, seemingly unnoticed, but we carry the unfinished sadness in our heart.

So, we're sad. Sad in the moment and anxious about the future.

We look back and we miss. We look forward and we worry.

We don't know how things are going to turn out or what is next. *Is this the new normal?* And we reel under the staggering truth that it might well be.

That's perhaps the most obvious response to COVID-19 – struggling to live in the moment. But I believe that something else is happening to us human beings as a result of this pandemic. Because we don't know what the future holds, we are forced to take in each day, each moment. For the most part, time constraints and deadlines aren't nipping at our heels. Expectations have slackened and "slow food" is replacing the "eat-on-the-run" culture we've created for ourselves.

What might we do in our day that we have not had the opportunity to do in the past?

This is what grief does. It stops us in our tracks. It asks us if we would like to view life through a different lens.

Jesus promise is to companion us in our grief and loss. He wants to carry our burden. Much of our existing grief seems to be focused on the unknown and preoccupation with the future – we forget that life is a precious gift *today*. Grief, like a giant magnet, pulls us toward an obsession to focus on what we no longer have, rather than being grateful for the blessings we do have.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reminds us to not be anxious about tomorrow. This is not as easy to do when we think about what is ahead of us when living in uncertainty.

Life has changed for us and it may never be the same.

The Bible story about the disciples whom Jesus met on the road to Emmaus has a lot of parallels for us today.

Jesus had died. Their leader. The person who could have changed their political circumstances and turn everything around for them was now dead. Jesus had told them that he would rise from the dead, but that message seemed too much of an enigma for them to manage. *And could it really be possible anyway?*

When Jesus met the disciples on the road, they were sad and focused on what was no longer part of their lives. Might I say, they were grieving. Jesus was gone – his body had disappeared was the word on the street. What would the future be like now for these disciples?

In the middle of this messiness, Jesus shows up on the road and walks with them. He asks them a brilliant question: “What things?” Jesus, through these powerful scriptures, helps these two disciples re-focus upon the central message of gospel by asking for their take on what had just happened. Then He interprets the events from his perspective. When invited to stay and eat with them, it is Jesus who invites them to draw closer to him in the breaking of the bread. Their eyes are opened, and they realize who it was they had been talking to all along. They had wondered if God was really present in the dark times they had just faced. He was. Right in front of them. All they had to do was take notice.

As Jesus says, at his ascension, “I will be with you always,” and God is. He’s with us even today through his Holy Spirit.

Read Luke 24:13-35 and reflect upon these questions and the accompanying scripture. Imagine Jesus engaging you in your uncertainty and sadness. When you are sad or fearful of the unknown, what message are you are hearing from Jesus through these scriptures that you can count on?

- 1) *And he said to them, “What things?”* - Luke 24:19a
 - **Is Jesus asking us to return and stand firm on a specific message that is most significant about who he is and what he has done?**

- 2) *So, they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going further.* – Luke 24:28
 - **Is Jesus hoping that we will invite him to draw closer to us?**

- 3) *And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight.* – Luke 24:31
 - **Is Jesus reminding us that even though there are times that you may question his presence, we can be certain that he is always with us through the Holy Spirit?**

From a grief perspective, we know what happens when stress comes into our lives. God has created us wonderfully and intricately from a physiological perspective. We have built-in mechanisms to protect us from further harm.

We can be certain that when we are under stress – which many people are these days – our cortisol levels rise. Cortisol is nature’s built-in alarm system. It’s your body’s main stress hormone. It works with certain parts of your brain to control your mood, motivation and fear.

Your adrenal glands, the triangle-shaped organs at the top of your kidneys produce cortisol.

This cortisol is best known for helping fuel your body’s “fight-or-flight” instinct in a crisis. Isn’t God amazing how he made us?

But cortisol plays an important role in a number of things your body does. For example, it:

- Manages how your body uses carbohydrates, fats, and proteins
- Keep inflammation down
- Regulates blood pressure
- Increases blood sugar / glucose
- Controls sleep/wake cycles
- Boosts energy in order for us to handle stress

But if cortisol levels get too high, then they can have a negative impact on your body and health. Perhaps you have noticed these in yourself or in other around you.

After the anxiety or danger has passed, your cortisol levels and therefore your body systems usually go back to normal.

But what if you’re under constant stress and your system is on “red alert” all the time?

It can derail your body’s most important functions. It can also lead to a number of health problems, including:

- Depression & anxiety
- Headaches
- Heart disease
- Memory and concentration issues
- Digestive problems
- Insomnia
- Weight gain

Sadness can lead to depression. Depression can lead to mental health challenges.

There are many healthy interventions you can add to your life to help reduce the cortisol levels (that are coursing through our bodies in these uncertain and anxious times).

Research speaks conclusively about the importance of physical exercise, diet, play and rest (to name a few) in helping to reduce stress that often accompanies grief, which I believe many of us are experiencing during this time of uncertainty.

But what about our unique Christian resources?

We have this amazing gift of prayer and meditation, God's Holy and precious Word, the gift of worship and a compassionate community of believers that we call *family*.

I would like to propose two things in particular that I believe will help you in your time of uncertainty and although these may not be distinctly Christian, looking at them through a faith perspective takes them up a notch, *gratitude* and *meaning making*.

Scripture tells us, *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."* – **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

Ask yourself this question: "What do I have in my life for which to be thankful?" List them. Whatever is good. However small it may seem. List it. Resist the urge to get waylaid by what you don't have or wish you had. Only the good things. You'll likely need another sheet of paper – or two.

Scripture tells us, *"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it. I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."* – **Isaiah 43:18-19**

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." – **Revelation 21:5**

Ask yourself this question: "What am I seeing in my life right now that I haven't seen before that may help me to live differently and on purpose in the future? What is God making new in you?"

Your life will never be the same after COVID-19. Never.

But perhaps, someday, you will see not so much what you lost, but what you gained. What will 'different' look like?

"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." – **Isaiah 64:8**

I wonder what *different* will look like for you.

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