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“What next?” she asked me as we stood in the hospital room where her father had died earlier that evening. “I’ve never had to do anything like this. I know that my dad’s with God now, but I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do next...what the hospital expects me to do now. What’s next?”

I reassured her that she could remain in the hospital room as long as she wanted, but that at some point the hospital would need to notify a funeral home. “Which funeral home do you prefer?” I asked.

“I don’t know what funeral home he wanted,” she confessed. “This happened so suddenly that we didn’t even get to talk about that. I’m not sure what to do. What next?”

I think that’s a question we’ve all asked at one time or another, especially now: What next?...

When someone in the family has a fever and hard time breathing, possible symptoms of COVID-19, we may wonder, “What next?”

When the diagnosis comes back positive and the family enters quarantine, what next?

When the job you’ve had for many years suddenly closes due to a lack of customers, what next?

When the state begins to reopen but you still feel scared, what next?

Throughout history faithful people have been asking that same question:

- When God’s people had to make bricks as slaves for the Pharaoh for his building projects, they cried out, “What next?”
- When exiles were carried from their homes and forced to relocate to Babylon, they wondered, “What next?”
- When Roman soldiers captured Jesus and executed him on a cross, those who had hoped he would bring peace to their oppressed corner of the world agonized, “What next?”

When the news about Jesus’ resurrection began circulating, many may have wondered, “What next?” Some thought Jesus would return soon to usher in a new peaceful kingdom, but as the waiting went on, some may have become discouraged. The apostle

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Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth to reassure them of God's saving work in the world while they waited.

Friends, let me go over the Message with you one final time...The Messiah died for our sins, exactly as Scripture tells it; that he was buried; that he was raised from death on the third day...that he presented himself alive to Peter, then to his closest followers, and later to more than five hundred of his followers...he then spent time with James...and that he finally presented himself alive to *me*.¹

Some, however, must have been uncertain about what was next, doubting the possibility of resurrection, for Paul then offered an argument for the reality of resurrection. At that time different ideas existed on this notion, even within Judaism. One group, the Pharisees, believed that resurrection was possible, while another group, the Sadducees, denied its possibility. You can imagine the confusion in the early church as they heard different arguments about resurrection.

Paul sounds a bit frustrated as he wrote to the church:

If you became believers because you trusted the proclamation that Christ is alive, risen from the dead, how can you let people say that there is no such thing as a resurrection? If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ. And face it—if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors.²

Just as those early followers of Jesus were wondering “what's next” in regard to their faith, we too are uttering the same question. We may not be pondering the question of resurrection, but we're wondering what's next with the coronavirus.

- Some states have begun to open, while others recognize that we have not reached the peak of the curve.
- Some people wear a mask everywhere they go, while others do not.
- Some strive to maintain a space of 6 feet apart, while some often forget.

Some may even be asking, “Where is God in all this mess?” and may cry out “We need a sign that you are here!” We're not the first people in history

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to ask such a question, as preacher Thomas Long realized as he

posed a hypothetical question first advanced by [theologian] Frederick Buechner. What if God were to rearrange the stars in the sky one night, to spell out the words, "I REALLY EXIST"? The reaction, Long says, would be dramatic:

"Churches would spill over into football stadiums, crime would cease, wars would suddenly stop, an uncanny hush would fall over the world—for a while. But, then, there would be the message in the stars night after night, month after month, year after year. Every night the sky would proclaim "I REALLY EXIST," and it would become a normal part of nature."

What we really need, Long continues, is something more:

"What we really want in our deepest need is not proof that there is a God somewhere who exists, or even scientific evidence that a resurrection happened some time ago in history. What we need is a God who is right here, knee-deep in the mud and mire of human existence—a risen Christ who comes to us every day to give life and hope. That is a God who comes not in evidence but in the relationship of trust we call faith."³

This is the God who is with us now, knee-deep in the mess of our world. We may not see an immediate result to the end of the virus, but

- we can see God in those in the hospital caring for those who are ill,
- in the scientists searching to find a vaccine,
- in those who donate food to pantries and in those who distribute the food to those who are hungry and out of work.
- in those who have continued to work as essential workers throughout this pandemic to allow many of us to stay home.

We don't need a message written in the stars to know that God is working in the world. God is as near to you as the breath you breathe each moment. Take a deep breathe...Feel the Spirit of God move within you. Even with the reassurance of God's presence, though, we of us may still wonder, "What next?" We may especially ask this question regarding our ability to gather in our sanctuaries again, for oh, how we long to meet and celebrate God's presence together!

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A team of members from both our congregations has been working on a plan to gather again, hopefully in mid-June. They are watching the curve of infections in our counties and devising a plan to make our spaces as safe as possible, though we will continue to livestream, for we know not everyone will feel comfortable to return.

As we closely monitor what's happening and implement changes in our worship settings, we hope to gather soon, but you will notice that things don't seem the same. "What next?" you may wonder. What will it look like when we return? Look on Facebook for a humorous view of what that might look like, so stayed tuned. And as you wonder "What next?" may you trust that God is with you in our messiness of life.

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, *The Message Bible*

² 1 Corinthians 15:12-14, *The Message Bible*

³ Thomas G. Long, "So, what about the resurrection?"

(https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002424/so_what_about_the_resurrection), February 15, 2004, as quoted on *HomileticsOnline.com*, April 8, 2012.