
Beyond Ascension
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 16:16-34 and Luke 24:44-53

I want to open with a question. How do you feel, and what do you do, when you hear that a big change is coming? It could be a change that would affect our entire society. Or it could be a change that impacts you personally. Or it could be a change that affects your local group, like a church.

And why am I talking about change today? Because today we celebrate the ascension of Jesus. And for the disciples who witnessed Jesus evaporating into the clouds, I'm guessing that they thought that was a big change. And we'll get there in a bit.

How do we normally respond to the threat of change?

I would actually love to hear your answers over coffee later. But I'm going to give a general answer now. For most people, the threat of change leads to fear. And that fear will either lead us to become defensive, or it will propel us to make positive changes. There are also people for whom the threat of change represents good opportunities for growth.

In short, when changes come along, some of us say, "not again", and some of us say, "it's about time". But let's be honest here. Most people do not enjoy change. For most people, when we hear about a coming change, we fear the worst.

[image: quote below]

I want to share an example of this using the story of a respected Swiss scientist, Conrad Gessner. Gessner was among "the first to raise the alarm about the effects of information overload [on our society]. In a landmark book, he described how the modern world overwhelmed people with data and that this overabundance was both 'confusing and harmful' to the mind. [can you relate?] It is worth noting the Gessner, for his part, never once used e-mail and was completely ignorant about computers.

[image: Gessner]

That's not because he was a technophobe but because he died in the year 1565.

His warnings referred to the seemingly unmanageable flood of information unleashed by the printing press.”¹

[quote below]

Gessner was not the first person to help us realize that “our fears about the future can impact our lives far more than the future actually impacts our lives”.

As another example, in the 1830’s, trains were becoming a popular form of transportation. Early trains were quite slow. And there was a great deal of fear when trains started to have the ability to move faster than horses. It was commonly believed - even by medical doctors - that if trains ever went faster than horses, riders would suffocate. Women’s uteruses could fly out of their bodies. Passengers would go insane.

[image: quote below]

“Five hundred years ago, Michel de Montaigne [the 16th-century French philosopher] said: ‘My life has been filled with terrible misfortune; most of which never happened.’ [And the Huffington Post released an article] that proves it. This study looked into how many of our imagined calamities never materialize. In this study, subjects were asked to write down their worries over an extended period of time and then identify which of their imagined misfortunes did not actually happen. Lo and behold, it turns out that 85 percent of what subjects worried about never happened, and with the 15 percent that did happen, 79 percent of subjects discovered either they could handle the difficulty better than expected, or the difficulty taught them a lesson worth learning. This means that 97 percent of what you worry over is not much more than a fearful mind punishing you with exaggerations and misperceptions.”²

We are often triggered into fear of something new - or the possibility of change - but when we look further down the road, it turns out that we are doing ok after all. The predicted crises did not happen.

And that appears to be what is happening in both of our bible stories this week.

[image: go to jail]

In our reading from Acts, Paul and Silas are thrown in jail. But did you - as I did -

¹ http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2010/02/dont_touch_that_dial.html

² https://www.huffpost.com/entry/85-of-what-we-worry-about_b_8028368

find it a bit odd that they don't seem to care? For most of us, being thrown into jail would be traumatic to say the least. But in our story, when Paul and Silas go to jail, it doesn't seem to make much difference to them. Instead of wanting to see a lawyer, or demanding their phone call, Paul and Silas spend their time in jail singing and praying. Which is what they had been doing on the street. It's almost as if they don't realize that jail is a bad place. It's almost as if being in jail is just as good as being anywhere else.

[image: don jail]

They push that idea so far that when an earthquake opens all the prison doors, Paul and Silas do not even escape. They appear to be just as happy singing and praising God in prison as they are on the street. Being sent to prison did not seem to impact them at all. Interesting, right?

[image: ascension]

And a similar thing happens in our gospel reading. The disciples are spending time with Jesus and - whoosh - Jesus is whipped away into the clouds. And how do the disciples react? They don't really react. They act as if nothing strange is going on at all. How do you think you and I would have reacted to Jesus disappearing into the clouds? If Jesus had given us any warning, we would have pleaded with him to stay. We would have been traumatized when our leader left us. And we would definitely have been freaked out by the method of Jesus's departure. And yet, the disciples act as if nothing strange has happened at all.

[image: Jesus as Mary Poppins]

Think about it. Jesus floats upwards like Mary Poppins, and the disciples are like, "let's go for coffee". They just take it in stride. They praise God. They pray. They sing. Both bible stories today share a common feature. People are faced with a big change in their lives And yet, they act as if nothing really changed.

And that should surprise us. Because for us, when future changes are predicted, we usually freak out! As I said earlier, most of us react strongly to even the possibility of change. But earlier I also said that sometimes, the threat of change represents good opportunities for growth. Change - if it is managed well - can be a blessing in disguise.

[image: Y2K]

I want to share one more story. Not quite so old. Who here remembers Y2K, and all the panic around it? In the late 1990s, people were panicking about what would happen when the clock struck midnight on January 1, 2000. There was intense fear that all computer systems would crash. It was called Y2K because it was a reference to the year 2000, hence Y2K.

[image: Y2K explanation]

For decades, in many industries, computers had been programmed to accept only 2 digits to represent a particular year. It was assumed that a number like 85 would mean 1985. So only the last 2 digits were actually stored.

[image: data storage]

This problem was created decades earlier - likely in the 1950's. Because data storage was so expensive back then. The decision to only save 2 digits to represent a year was to save on memory space.

[image: so how do you enter 2000]

And people wondered what would happen when you wanted to enter the year 2000. Because that would be entered as just 00, which would be interpreted as 1900, not 2000. People were seriously worried that banks might fail completely. Planes might fall from the sky. Food supplies would be depleted. Vehicles that used computer chips might be inoperative. Power grids could go dark. Y2K had all the ingredients of an apocalypse.

[image: cat sleeping]

But... midnight came. And... very little happened. There were a few isolated situations where software had not been fixed properly and things went wrong. But there was nothing like the global meltdown that had been predicted.

I remember I was working as a scientist at the time, and was also managing the computer systems for my division. I remember management coming to me to ask what I was doing to prepare for Y2K. And they were very unimpressed when I said, "I'm not worried about it." When people want to panic they really don't like people who are calm. So I told them the real crisis would be in 2038. They just walked away shaking their heads.

[image: 2038 crisis]

By the way, the next big computer crisis will be in 2038. I won't bore you with the details now, but please reach out if you want to know all about it.

[image: empty shelves]

Because Y2K fears did not materialize, many people decided that Y2K had just been a hoax. But reality was far less exciting. The reality was that people who actually worked in the field had known about this issue for decades. And had worked to make our computer systems more robust prior to the big day. Very little went wrong on the day because competent people fixed potential problems before they became actual problems. The crisis did not happen - not because it wasn't real - but because we predicted it and fixed it ahead of time.

So with that very long preamble out of the way, why are we talking about this today?

[image: changes ahead]

It's because we face changes today. And we get to decide how to deal with those changes.

For the disciples, and for Paul and Silas, they were happily moving along in their ministries, and then all of a sudden they were faced with big changes. The disciples lost the presence of Jesus, and Paul and Silas were imprisoned. Not good, right?

And the question for all of them was - how do we continue our ministry given the big changes to their reality? Or perhaps they even wondered if they could continue their ministries. In both stories, they continued. They adapted to their present reality, and they continued almost as if nothing had changed.

That is where we find ourselves today too. Perhaps on a personal level, but definitely at a congregational level. The conditions under which we do ministry have changed. And we get to decide what to do about it.

Over the years our communities have changed. And in our wider society, religion has ceased to fill some of the important functions that we used to provide. This is partly good of course. I'm delighted that here in Thorncliffe Park TNO runs a food bank, provides employment supports, runs a homework club. All activities that many churches did for decades.

Our communities have changed. I make that bold statement regardless of where you live. Because this congregation represents quite a few different neighbourhoods and cities. The economic, racial, and ethnic demographics of our neighbourhoods have changed. Sometimes, people wonder if we even fit in our own community anymore. Here in Thorncliffe Park we have lots of new immigrants and refugees. Statistically, they are mainly Muslim. Of the Christians who move here, most of them are Roman Catholic. Our neighbourhood has changed.

And we ourselves have changed. We are older than we used to be. We are the product of an amalgamation. We embrace online members as well as in-person members. We have changed.

Our conditions have changed. Both our neighbourhoods and we ourselves have changed. And we, like Paul, Silas, and the disciples get to make the same choice that they had to make. How do we continue to live and breathe ministry into our congregation and our communities?

The question is - is this a crisis in the making? Or is this just one of those situations where our fear of the future is more debilitating than the future itself?

To me, this “crisis” feels a lot like Y2K. Because any crisis in the church is less likely to happen if we are proactive and we take steps to prepare. If we take steps to live into a new future. The disciples embraced a ministry without the direct presence of Jesus. And they thrived. We can also thrive if we live in the present.

We need to live beyond ascension ... not tomorrow ... but today.

With Y2K, the crisis did not happen - not because it wasn't real - but because we predicted it and fixed it ahead of time. We just need to do the same thing in the church. We just need to continue to create and explore meaningful ministry opportunities within our congregation and in our communities. And I believe that is exactly what we have been doing here as long as I have known you.

Besides, we have a number of advantages over Paul and Silas, and over the disciples. Paul and Silas were put in jail. We are not in jail. We are free to come and go as we please. But more importantly, we are free to open our doors as wide as we want to. We are free to embrace our community in any way we choose.

The disciples watched their leader disappear, leaving them flat-footed. But we have good people here, people who are committed to our present and our future. And personally, I have no plans to go anywhere anytime soon.

We do not always get to choose what changes. But we always get to choose how we respond to change. And like the early church, we can choose to carry on our mission, even in new circumstances.

We have so many gifts here. We have the gift of each other. We have the gift of a community in which we can be the face of Christ for others. We have the gift of the spirit. We are living with the spirit of the risen Christ. What more do we need?

The Ascension does not leave us looking up - it sends us out. Not just to preserve what was, but to participate in what is becoming. In a world where the church is no longer at the centre, we are still called to be at the heart of community. So let's not retreat. Instead we can we adapt. We listen, we learn, we love, we show up. Because God is already at work in our neighbourhoods - and we are invited to join in.

I invite us all to live beyond ascension.

Amen.