



### **Easter introduces the 'New Normal'**

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Text: John 20.19-31 Jesus in the Upper Room

Everywhere we are being exhorted to get used to a 'new normal'. The phrases 'self-isolating' and 'social distancing' were unknown until a few weeks ago: but now everyone knows what they mean and is putting them into practice. If you are not self-isolating or social distancing and you should be, then you are definitely abnormal.

All over the place, also, there are indications that some of the practices we have adopted in response to the health crisis will stay. In the education field, for instance, some universities, colleges and schools have been in the vanguard of eLearning and have been teaching and relating to students consistently through the internet: now the whole of education is taking place over the internet and – we don't know which yet - but many practices are likely to stick. And it will be the same for the church and for other areas of activity. Zoom meetings used to be just for the techies and those not wanting to travel hundreds or thousands of miles for a meeting. From now on Zoom meetings may become our default way of discussing things in groups and committees. Why travel half an hour to a central meeting place and expend time and valuable fuel resources doing this when you can stay in the comfort of your own home and log in to a meeting simply through the click of a mouse?

We aren't the first group of people, however, challenged to get used to a 'new normal'. Sudden shifts in situations and circumstances have been happening throughout history. 9/11 in 2001 forced the world to take notice of aggrieved Muslims in a new way. The fall of the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall in 1989 quickly invited the people of Russia and Eastern Europe to adjust to a sometimes unsettling new normal. The Great Fire of London meant the destruction of much of the medieval city and the building of a Christopher Wren dominated capital – 'a new normal'. The different religious allegiances of Henry VIII and his daughters Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth 1 in Tudor times meant the 'normal' fluctuated wildly from Catholic to Protestant to Catholic and back to Protestant depending on which monarch was on the throne.

And so we come to Jesus' time. Jesus' resurrection introduces not just a new normal for the first disciples. It introduces a new normal to the whole of world history. Jesus' resurrection is the pivot across which Creation balances. Easter means that, even in the face and event of death, the pivot always balances in favour of new life. Death is not the end. Through and beyond death is the

promise of a timeless loving relationship with God for all those who, before or perhaps even during their death, recognise Jesus as God's embodiment on earth. It was with this 'new normal' – death transcended for Jesus and for all humanity through the resurrection - that the disciples in the Upper Room were struggling. And which of us wouldn't have struggled too? There they were, gathered behind locked doors, when, John says, 'Jesus came and stood among them...and showed them his hands and his side'. 14 words introduces us to the new normal. Jesus died a terrible death. Jesus comes to us in ways beyond comprehension as a symbol of God's eternal life-giving power. John goes on to say that one disciple, Thomas, was missing that first evening.

I wonder why he wasn't there. He's usually caricatured as 'Doubting Thomas' – the one who didn't 'get it'. Might it be, on the other hand, that he wasn't there because he was the only one who did 'get it'? Had he, perhaps, adjusted to 'the new normal' quicker than anyone else? Was he, alone of all the disciples, not afraid? When Thomas saw Jesus a week later, was he able to describe and affirm the Resurrected Christ as 'My Lord and My God' because he had twigged and adjusted quicker than anyone else? We'll never know. John certainly portrays Thomas throughout his Gospel as keen on facts and keen on commitment. Even if he did doubt, perhaps his adjustment to 'the new normal' was quicker than anyone else's – thus enabling him to call Jesus 'My Lord and my God' so quickly.

Let's rejoice next that John concludes this story with Jesus blessing all those who have not seen him in the flesh but still believe. This blessing, therefore, falls on all of us... people like you, people like me...all of us who join with Thomas in seeing Christ's resurrection transcending time and space and initiating 'the new normal'.

Some of you may remember me developing a phrase I heard Rowan Williams use about transcendence some years ago. Talking about the transcendence God offers, wherever we are, through the Eucharist, he poetically suggested every Eucharist says, 'There is another place...and it is here.' I found myself 'riffing' on that phrase and developing two more. God's gift of transcendent new life in Christ means not only, geographically, that 'There is another place...and it is here', but also chronologically 'There is another time...and it is now' and personally 'There is another you...and it is the you God wills you to become'.

At this time of extreme challenge to accept and adjust to a 'new normal' I offer you these phrases again: 'There is another place...and it is here', 'There is another time...and it is now', 'There is another you...and it is the you God wills you to become'. Try saying them and mulling them over in your head or in your prayers sometime in the next few days. Behind the words is the thought that God is always transcending what humans take to be normal with fresh, different and sometimes disruptive alternatives. None more so than humanity's concept of death. For God – and for us when in relationship with God revealed in Christ – death becomes the gateway to new life. The old normal disappears: a new normal, in God's time, take its place.

So, finally, two questions: isn't the pivot around which the axle of human history turns Easter? And shouldn't the resurrection of Christ define the new normal? Let's pray that it will – and, in the power of God's Spirit, let's help to make it happen. Amen.