

Easter 2022

John 20: 1-18

April 17, 2022

I've been thinking about the difference between *interrupting* and *disrupting*. If you're interrupted while speaking or doing something, you can pick up again where you left off. It's like hitting a pause button and then hitting play again. You go back to the way things were.

*Disruption is different.* The life of a whole community is disrupted when a highway is built through your neighborhood. Anyone who has been married knows that marriage disrupts your life—just like becoming a parent does. Life as you knew is over.

The onset of a chronic physical or mental illness in yourself or a family member is a disruption.

We all have a fresh experience of how a pandemic disrupts everything about our lives. As much as some act like it's an interruption, it's impossible to go back to the way we were. We don't all have the same experience of disruption in this pandemic but all of our lives have been altered.

The crushing images and heart-wrenching stories from the war in Ukraine show us the power of disruption—how literally from one day to the next your life can be turned upside down.

Death is the ultimate disruption of life as we know it.

The disciples who followed Jesus—who became his closest friends—had their lives completely disrupted by Jesus. They left their previous lives behind to

follow him. We look at that and wonder if we could ever do that but from the way the Gospels tell it, following Jesus was the best thing that ever happened to them.

Until his arrest and crucifixion.

They thought they were on a new path — a whole new way of life — with this rabbi – this teacher – called Jesus. But as suddenly as it started, it's over. Maybe this wasn't a *disruption* — this following Jesus — maybe it was just an *interruption* — a meaningful break — but now they'll just go back to living their regular lives.

Mary Magdalene is at the tomb and she's weeping—not just quietly crying. She's sobbing. She's having one of those moments when sadness just pummels you like a tidal wave. Mary is consumed by this grief and pain—so much so that seeing two angels doesn't seem to make a difference at all.

Overcome by her grief, Mary cares about just one thing—finding the body of Jesus so that he can be buried with dignity and care. Seeing Jesus alive is absolutely the last thing Mary expects to see, so when Jesus speaks to her, she doesn't recognize him at first—until he says her name.

When Jesus says her name, “Mary”—she recognizes him. This is the dead man she was looking for—very much alive.

Her sorrow—her grief—what she is looking for—is completely disrupted.

That's what the Resurrection of Jesus is—a disruption. It's a disruption for Mary and the other disciples. Most immediately, a disruption of their grief and despair. But the Resurrection will prove to be much more than that because their lives are put on a whole new trajectory.

When Europeans came to the Hawaiian Islands—in the late 1700s, they brought a lot of diseases that native Hawaiians had never been exposed to before. These diseases decimated the local population. Within 100 years, the population of Hawaii went from 300,000 to 50,000.

Leprosy was the most dreaded of all the diseases and the Hawaiian authorities took some drastic steps to try to control it. Anyone with leprosy was taken away from their family, declared legally dead and banished to a leper colony on the remote and isolated island of Molokai.

Conditions on the island were horrible—not fit for human beings, really. People were actually dumped in the surf and had to swim to shore. They lived in caves and shacks. There were no laws or protection—it was basically every sick person for themselves.

Fr. Damien DeVeuster was a young Belgian priest, and he felt a call from God to serve this leper colony. So, he requested to be assigned to Molokai. He wanted to instill a sense of dignity and self-worth in these people who had been treated worse than most people treat animals—and so he started with restoring dignity to death--much like Mary was showing the value of Jesus's life by honoring and caring for his dead body.

When Fr. Damien arrived, the bodies of the dead of Molokai were disappearing quickly because they were being put in shallow graves and eaten by pigs and dogs. Damien designed a clean, fenced in cemetery and he instituted a burial society.

He built a church and worked with others in the community to build clean new homes. Robert Elsberg writes, “Within several years of his arrival the island was utterly transformed; *no longer a way-station to death, it had become a proud and joyful community.*”

Damien came to this leper colony and disrupted it. He put it on a whole new trajectory.

He realized that he couldn't keep his distance from people. To build them up—to let them know that they were loved and valued—he knew they needed to have contact with him. Rather than trying to protect himself from this dreaded disease, Damien came close. He thought of himself as one of the people and he spoke that way, saying “we lepers.”

In time, he indeed became one of them when he contracted leprosy himself. He continued his work until he was too debilitated by the disease, and eventually he died from it.

Like Jesus, Fr. Damien was fully incarnated in the community he loved and served. There was no distance—no avoidance of suffering and death.

Leprosy is treatable now and the leper colony was abolished in 1969. But there are people who have chosen to stay on Molokai. There was more to life on this island and in this community than a dreaded disease. That is the lasting legacy of Fr. Damien—and testimony to his life-altering disruption.

I've never been to Molokai but a travel writer pointed to another sign of this disruption. The people of Molokai are polite but guarded toward tourists—whom they call “consumers”. You won't get to see much of Molokai if you come as a consumer. But if you come to learn and participate as a short-term volunteer, the people of Molokai will welcome you and show you the real Molokai.

That points to a strong sense of valuing who you are—and the community you have—of knowing your worth and of knowing what real relationships are.

This is what Resurrection looks like. In a place where people are discarded—where it looks like their lives—and even life itself has no value—Resurrection comes in and disrupts the power of death. It sets people on a path of Life.

God, in the person of Jesus, willingly came into this leper colony of a world to set it—even in the midst of death—on a new trajectory. Mary calls him, Rabounni, Teacher. Like Fr. Damien, he was fully incarnated in our human life. He did not keep his distance but came to eliminate the distance between God and us—and the distance between each of us. He came to teach us how to live fully *before* we die—he came to show us how amazing life can be when being afraid to die doesn't dominate our lives. He came to disrupt the power of death in our lives by showing us there is *always more*.

The Resurrected Jesus comes to each of us in a unique way. In my experience, he comes to us at the place of our deepest longing—often in the place of utter despair-- and he disrupts it. Often, it takes a while to recognize that's what has happened—just like it took a minute for Mary to recognize Jesus. Resurrection almost never looks like what we thought it would look like—because it's something new.

Just as it happened through Fr. Damien, the disruptive power of the Resurrection is unleashed in the world through human beings.

So, my hope and prayer for all of us today is that we will hear this word of Resurrection. That in the midst of all that we are living—in the midst of the pandemic, in the midst of isolation, economic uncertainty and a battered, fragile planet—in the midst of racism, poverty, war and death--that we will *know* the disruption of the Resurrection. And, finally, I pray that the power of the Resurrection will be unleashed *through us*.

Thanks be to God. Amen.