

“Overwhelmed.” It’s a word I’ve heard a good bit the last few weeks in one context or another. My colleagues have been overwhelmed by liturgical responsibilities during Holy Week; the mother of our middle school neighbor was overwhelmed by the 5 tests her daughter had to take the Friday before spring break; a dear friend said she feels overwhelmed by the physical and emotional impact of various medical interventions to help her with her illness.

Of the thousands of followers Jesus collected in his years of public ministry, not many showed up in those last few days to lend support. Of the twelve who were his closest friends, one turned him in to the authorities and several others fell asleep when specifically asked to stay awake and pray for him. None of them showed up at the cross. None did the hard work of being present when the going got tough. By the time we reach this point in John’s Gospel, none have stepped into the gap, practicing Jesus’ teachings and living into the message they’d heard for years. By anyone’s standard, they’ve failed. And so I imagine ‘overwhelmed’ is an appropriate descriptor for how the disciples were feeling those first few days after the crucifixion.

How do you deal when you’re feeling overwhelmed? Do you scrub your house clean, or pull out the credit card for retail therapy? Do you go for a run, or seek comfort from overeating or other self-destructive behaviors? Do you lash out in frustration over small slights or put your paintbrushes to the canvas? Do you hide under the covers and wish the world away or do you seek the company of your closest friends?

The disciples, it seems, coped by getting together and locking themselves away. All of them, except Thomas, it seems. Guilt-ridden, fearful for their physical safety, grieving their leader and friend, and spiritually lost, they’ve locked themselves in a house. I wonder what they were doing in there: were they praying? Drinking? Reminiscing? Saying tearful goodbyes as they planned to go back to their hometowns? Were they hoping to pick back up the pieces of a life they left behind?

We all know that in those moments of complete inability to process events and emotions, we are generally better off if we take a deep breath. It gives us

a moment of pause – to make a choice to respond rather than react. A deep breath brings oxygen to our brain, helping us to think more clearly, and diffuse the intensity of our emotions. We have a chance to determine what responses are helpful and which are not.

If I were one of those disciples, my chest would be tight and I would likely be having trouble taking that deep breath. My guilt. My fear. My disappointment at my own choices. My despair at all I had believed in – **who** I had believed in - seemingly all for naught. Anger that I had left my home, my family, my job for *something* that perhaps was a whole bunch of **nothing**. I'd be in a bad sort of way.

But then – out of nowhere – Jesus (in typical unexpected fashion: disregarding his friends' attempts to run and hide behind locked doors) is suddenly on the scene. "Peace be with you," he pronounces.

Ultimate words of forgiveness aren't the words they likely expected to hear in that moment. Perhaps words of indictment, perhaps a demand for explanation and apology, but not charitable words of grace: words of reconciliation and absolution. Hearing that all was well between them and God, that no grudges were held, that relationship was not fractured ... that must have been equally overwhelming.

For some reason, whenever I have read this story before, I suppose I've been so caught up in that whirlwind of emotion and utter shock that I somehow miss the next part and skip right on over to the bit about Thomas and doubt and his proclamation of faith. I miss the most remarkable bit that's right there ~ did **you** catch it?

In that moment when Jesus appeared, the disciples are there, wrung out with emotions of grief and relief, guilt and redemption, fear and possibility. Jesus spoke words of forgiveness and love and then ... *he breathed on them*. The disciples receive an extraordinary gift: that of God's own deep breath. Having been paralyzed into inaction, they inhale God's breath, God's Spirit. Jesus' life essence that was released in a cosmic moment of surrender and release and atonement on the cross, is here blown into the souls of those who would carry on his work.

Throughout Scripture, we speak of God's breath being God's Spirit: God's breath hovered over the waters in creation, and God breathed life into Adam in the Garden.

John tells us that Jesus gifts the disciples not just with restored relationship, but also with the gift of the Holy Spirit and a charge to go into the world in God's name. No apologies had been offered. No explanations for their sorry choices had been presented. No words of confession or acts of contrition ... and still they were forgiven, restored and on track with their mission to do God's work in the world.

I watched a TedTalk the other day about how to deal with feelings of being overwhelmed by Daniel Levitin.¹ He explains that after a crisis event, most of us conduct a post-mortem: we often reflect on what went wrong and what we could have done to prevent or minimize the damage caused by the event. Mr. Levitin suggests a better way of dealing with disaster is to do a pre-mortem: consider the ways a crisis could occur in a forthcoming situation, and minimize the chances of a crisis developing in the first place or at least minimizing the effects of it should it not be preventable. For some, that might mean imagining the worst possible scenario – knowing from experience that the worst possible scenario nearly never happens. For others, it might mean managing one's own expectations or simply standing on the front porch of *that* person's house, taking a few extra deep breaths.

The disciples had likely been doing their own post-mortem while locked away in that house: recounting all the shoulda's, coulda's, and woulda's of Jesus' final days. Ironically though, God had already done the pre-mortem: God had already known what would happen and had planned how the crisis would get resolved. All would be well. Despite all evidence to the contrary, everything's going to work out okay. For the disciples, and for us, too. God still knows what will happen and how it will all work out. All shall be well.

A wise friend who has been journeying through extreme hardship recently, a man who has every right to hide under the covers and wallow in his problems, reminded me that we aren't guaranteed a life that's easy – it's a reality that we

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https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_levitin_how_to_stay_calm_when_you_know_you_ll_be_stressed?referrer=playlist-talks_to_help_you_manage_stres#t-238934; The idea of a pre-mortem is based on the work of a host of other people that he mentions in his talk.

must learn to live with – but as Christians, we know that our hardships are all temporary, if agonizing at times. God is unfailingly good, he said, even when our circumstances make that hard to recognize.

The beauty of Easter is that God knows our hearts, knows our failings, and knows how the divine drama will all work out in the end. God knows the secrets we harbor behind the locked doors of our hearts – and God’s first and last response is always the same: “peace be with you.” It’s a peace that’s freely offered - without strings and without limitations.

Once that peace lays claim to us, whether that Peace is embodied right before us with nail holes in his hands, or whether that Peace is hidden from our view as we stand in the shadow of the cross, we receive that same deep breath of God blown into us that gives us freedom and authority and courage to do the work we are given to do: to live the Gospel in all our circumstances. And that, too, is overwhelming – in all the best ways.

May the Peace of the Lord be always with you.