

“Lost and Found”

John 20:19-23

8/9/20

In the 2011 film, “Hugo,” a 12 year-old orphan lives alone in a 1930’s Paris railway station, where he maintains the large clock in the tower. In this scene, he is talking with his friend, Isabelle, about life finding purpose in life. (SHOW HUGO SCENE)

Many people go through times of feeling lost, without purpose, directionless. It may be a classic mid-life crisis, or at the beginning of retirement or after a health crisis. It may be right after college, following a job loss, or in your last years. Or, it may come during a pandemic. Some of you are feeling lost right now as you can no longer hang out with friends and family, your work may have ended or changed, your volunteer work may have dried up, and you really miss being together for worship each Sunday. You feel lost, and wonder what your purpose is right now.

There are a number of biblical examples of people who experienced similar feelings, but I’ve settled on the experience of the disciples following Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and then ascension. They had settled into a pretty good life with Jesus. Every day he encouraged them, taught them, corrected them, healed them, and was also their very good friend. They had dedicated themselves to serving him, believing that he was the Messiah, the one who would lead God’s people, Israel, to freedom. Then everything changed in a few short days. They went from the triumphant joy

of Palm Sunday to the depths of despair on Good Friday. Some of you have experienced that kind of sudden and unwelcome change!

Here's what happened next. ¹⁹*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* ²⁰*After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* ²¹*Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* ²²*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* (John 20:19-23)

As the scene begins, the disciples are locked away, terrified, inside a house in Jerusalem. Everything they envisioned for their future is now gone. Their leader, the one they had trusted with their lives, has been publicly executed in the most horrific way. Evil has triumphed over good. It's over. And they are in despair. Then Jesus shows up!

He wishes them peace. They could certainly use some of that! Peace was the last thing they were feeling! Fear, despair, grief, confusion? Sure! Peace is a welcome relief for them. And then Jesus breathes on them and gives them his Spirit. He has already told them a lot about the

ministry of the Spirit a few chapters back. The Spirit will comfort them and instruct them and empower them for ministry. And he has a new mission for them, which he'll state in different ways in the following days. Here, it's about sharing God's forgiveness with others. And, he's sending them out to the whole world with the good news of God's love for all people.

What happens here in John 20 is a paradigm for what happens to us when we are directionless and without purpose. That's where the disciples begin. Their old way of life with its expectations for the future is gone, and they are afraid and lost. While Jesus will remain with them for a few more days, the time of hanging out with him and listening to him and eating with him is over. Their hope that he would intervene and liberate Israel from the Romans is also gone. It's not going to happen. That's a huge loss for them, but the first thing they have to do if they are to experience healing and regain a sense of purpose, is to let go of that past and the hopes and dreams that went with it.

Only then can they receive the new thing that Jesus is going to do through them. It begins when they receive his Spirit, and then receive their new mission. Empowered by his Spirit, they are going to multiply Jesus' work, continuing his teaching and healing ministry, and making new disciples who will then carry on his work in their own spheres of influence.

They in turn will make more disciples, and on and on, until today there are over a billion followers of Jesus around the world!

But, it began with their acceptance that things were not ever going to be what they once were. It's the same for us. Whether it's time for retirement, or a job change, or the end of a marriage, or the impact of the pandemic, we begin the process forward by admitting to ourselves that the old is gone. In Jesus' words, we lose our lives in order to find them.

But that takes a lot of courage. And we can have courage because we believe that God is still at work and is not finished with us yet! GINFWYY! God is not finished with you yet! That foundational trust in God's presence in our lives enables us to let go of what has been, trusting that God has something good for us in the future. That's what the disciples had to do. Let go of Jesus' daily physical presence with them, and their misunderstanding of his mission, and trust that God had a good new future for them.

Discovering that new future can be tricky. But it often involves conversations with others whom we trust. Family, friends, fellow church members, or pastors. They can encourage and support us and give us feedback regarding how our gifts and passions may intersect with the needs of the world as it is now. Our Faith Community Nurse, Pam Phillips, recently told our staff how a few years ago, she was growing tired of her

traditional nursing work, but didn't know what to do. Then she talked with someone who told her about the work of parish nurses, and she was immediately drawn to it, as it combined her love of nursing with her vigorous faith. She let go of her previous work and has embraced this new calling much to our benefit!

Her experience demonstrates another piece to finding a sense of purpose: envisioning how your life might fit into the larger purposes of God in the world. It might be through your career, or you may contribute to God's work of justice and compassion for those in need through volunteer work or through a new ministry that you would begin! John Henry Newman put it like this: "God has created me to do Him some definite service; God has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have a mission...Therefore I will trust him...If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve him. Sickness, perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us. God does nothing in vain."

In season three of the Netflix series, "The Crown," Prince Phillip, husband of Queen Elizabeth, goes through a mid-life crisis. I'd show you a clip from the show, but I couldn't figure out a way to do that legally! Anyway, Phillip attempts to power through his crisis with more and more

manly activity, and a fascination with the first lunar landing. He even arranges to meet the three Apollo astronauts when they visit England, hoping their experiences out in space might have given them insight on the purpose of life on earth. Unfortunately, they don't have anything to offer him!

In the meantime, a new Anglican priest has begun working in his church. The priest, Robin Wood, has begun a retreat center at Windsor for priests who are struggling with issues of direction and purpose. Previously, Phillip had made fun of them for their reflective, conversation-based approach to resolving these issues. He chastised them, telling them what they really needed to get out of their funk was action, not sitting around navel gazing! But at the end of his rope, Phillip joins them one day.

He says, "My mother died recently. She saw that something was missing in me, her youngest child, her only son. Faith." "How's your faith?" she asked me. "I've lost it. And without it, what is there? Loneliness. Emptiness. Anti-climax. Gloom. That is what faithlessness is. The solution to our problem is not in ingenuity of a rocket, science, technology, or even bravery. The answer is in here (pointing to his head) or here (pointing to his heart). Wherever it is that faith resides. So, what I'm trying to say is...help. Help me." And with the support of the group, and a life-long friendship with the priest, Phillip was able to find a new purpose in living.

I don't expect such profound spiritual insight in a Netflix series, but there you go! As we deal with finding our purpose, we need faith in God's continuing work in our lives so we can let go of what has gone before in order to embrace the new thing that God has for us. We find that new thing, as Prince Phillip did, through the companionship of others and a renewal of our faith. Pray that God will lead you to his new purpose for you in God's good time. And pray that in this time of uncertainty God will strengthen your faith so that you'll be hopeful and ready.