

Wracked with Awe
John 20:19-23
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How about that for a sermon opener? Really excites you about what's to come doesn't it?

According to some researchers these words describe an ever-increasing number of American citizens. More and more Americans are not engaged by their work, don't believe they will achieve success, feel more disconnected from others and more anxious about the wider world. Now, does that describe any of you?

Just in case it does, I think that today's Gospel lesson might help, but to get at how, I want to begin by looking in an entirely different place – the world of video game design.

One of the more fascinating books I read last year was *Reality is Broken* by Jane McGonigal. McGonigal is a game designer and the subtitle of her book is *Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. According to McGonigal, some of the appeal of video games is that they momentarily, at least, lift us out of the boredom, anxiety, alienation, and meaninglessness of our lives by inviting us to be part of an alternative reality full of excitement. In this alternative reality we engage in epic projects, receive immediate feedback, and the thrill of adventure and success. And increasingly video games also involve social connection, as now most people play on-line as part of massive multiplayer games that involve thousands or even millions of other people.

McGonigal is devoted to finding ways to take what game designers have learned about people and apply those lessons to reality. She writes:

Games are showing us exactly what we want out of life: more satisfying work, better hope of success, stronger social connectivity, and the chance to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.

In case you thought these desires she lists resonate well with religious practice and spirituality, McGonigal is very explicit that what she's writing about has traditionally been the realm of spirituality. She's aware that there are spiritual connections to her ideas.

Now, in diagnosing how we've gotten so bored, anxious, alienated, and meaningless, she thinks that one of the major problems of the last generation in American life has been a focus on the individual with all of our language about self-help and self-esteem. She is very critical of that industry. She quotes another writer who says, "The self is a very poor site for meaning." So, what does bring happiness then? She writes,

Meaning is the feeling that we're part of something bigger than ourselves. It's the belief that our actions matter beyond our own individual lives. . . Meaning is something we are looking for more of: more ways to make a difference in the bigger picture, more chances to leave a lasting mark on the world, more moments of awe and wonder at the scale of the projects and communities we're a part of.

What video games provide and reality often lacks is the epic scale which contributes meaning and a sense of awe to our lives. What does she mean by "epic"? Three things:

- Epic contexts found in "collective stories that help us [to] connect our [lives]. . . to a much bigger mission."
- Epic environments: "vast, interactive spaces that provoke feelings of curiosity and wonder."
- And, epic projects: "cooperative efforts carried out . . . on massive scales, over months or even years."

Now, she emphasizes that you don't have to make a significant world-changing contribution yourself to feel this sort of meaning. You simply have to be given the opportunity to participate and contribute with others in something on that scale. Your contribution, however small, is part of this larger project that does participate in changing the world.

Let's look again at today's gospel. "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Divine Parent has sent me, so I send you.'"

Maybe the most basic lesson of Easter is that death does not have the final say; there will be new life. God will be faithful and will bring about a new creation. This Easter season I'm calling it a "Creative Revolution."

The second most basic lesson of Easter is that we are invited to participate in that new creation. At the empty tomb the young man appears to the women and tells them to go forth and spread the word. Whenever Jesus appears to the disciples in the gospel stories, he empowers them to carry on the work. Again and again the message is that we are sent forth on a mission.

So, God is faithful to bring about God's reign. It is a world of justice, peace, compassion, and beauty. Who wouldn't want to live in that world? This is the epic projects of all epic projects, because God's reign is everything we've hoped that the world will be. It's part of a compelling, collective story. Our vision of it evokes awe and wonder. And it requires a cooperative effort that is global and extended over the entirety of human history. Epic context, epic environment, epic project.

And, we are already invited to participate in it.

A few years ago I was attending a barbecue at a friend's house. At the party, a man was talking to me about the church he attended and he said something to the effect, "I don't go to church to learn anything new, because I don't need to, I go for the fellowship. Isn't that why

everyone goes to church?" I answered with an exasperated, "I hope not." And he looked at me puzzled. I went on. "That sounds like a social club to me. I go to church in order to change the world."

I am Christian because it is this story and this community which inspires me, which challenges me, and which at times convicts me. It presents the heroes and models upon which I would base my life. People like Francis of Assisi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, or my kindergarten Sunday school teacher Ruth Robinson, who didn't change a nation, but who taught children, including me, about forgiveness and love.

This Christian story tells me that I can be a better person and that this can be a better world. And it tells me some of the practices for accomplishing that – things like compassion, peace-making, prayer, kindness, generosity, and more.

This story tells me that I am empowered by a divine spirit and sent on a mission. And I have felt that spirit move in and through me. I felt it when I was building a wheel chair ramp while on a mission trip in Helena, Arkansas. As a pastor, I felt it while holding Mary Jane Haley's hand as she learned that her daughter had been murdered. I felt it while standing beside the Sea of Galilee, while worshipping in St. Peter's, even while worshipping in the small country church where my Dad grew up. I have felt it powerfully in my work with youth and children when you see their faces light up with a new epiphany and you know that they understand something that that did not understand before. And I felt it most powerfully the night my father died. In my darkest moment I was overwhelmed by the comforting presence of God's love.

All of these, and more, are the reasons I am a Christian. Not because I believe all the traditional doctrines, not because I have firm historic or scientific proof for the stories in the Bible, not because the church can answer all of my questions. I'm a Christian for the community, for the adventure, and for the meaning it brings to my life.

Jane McGonigal quotes one video game player as saying that after an hour of attempting to complete one battle scene, when he finally succeeded he was "wrecked with awe." I'm not very good at video games, but I understand what experience he's talking about because I've felt it. I've felt it as a follower of Jesus.

Do you want to spend your life in service to something extraordinary? Do you want to overcome boredom, anxiety, alienation and meaninglessness? Do you desire "more ways to make a difference in the bigger picture, more chances to leave a lasting mark on the world, more moments of awe and wonder?"

Then this Easter I invite you to follow Jesus and participate in God's "Creative Revolution."