Columns
Coronavirus
Spirituality



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Twenty-three years ago, when I was leaving Bangkok for my annual holiday, the children from the home where I was living had gathered to say goodbye. In a teasing way, one of the older ones turned to 3-year-old Songlit, who had become my little shadow, and said, "Sister is going away." With total conviction, he replied, "But she is coming back."

In this time of isolation because of COVID-19, and in the Easter season between Resurrection and Ascension, this is again very much in my mind. Health and wholeness will come back; we will be able to return to our family and friends, our workplaces and play places. COVID-19 is with us. But the politicians and the health professionals tell us it will go away — we need to just follow their advice, listen to what we are being told — stay at home, keep a distance from everyone, keep safe.

We are in this together. It will end. In one sense, maybe we are still in Easter Saturday, waiting for the new day to dawn when we can again go out, unite with our loved ones and live as before.

But it will not be as before. Everything may come back to normal — but it will be a different normal. Thousands have died and thousands of thousands have been changed in so many ways. I reflect: How have I changed? In what way has this experience helped me to grow?

Isn't the isolation and aloneness of Easter Saturday where we are now? Jesus had told his apostles what would happen — "The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death but three days later he will be raised to life" (Luke 9:22). "When I go, you will not be left alone: I will come back to you" (John 14:18). And how often had he told them not to be afraid?

But did they believe him? Did they understand what he was saying? They abandoned him — "He returned once more and found them asleep; they could not keep their eyes open" (Mathew 26:43). His subsequent leader denied him — "Then Peter said, I swear I am telling the truth! May God punish me if I am not. I do not know the man" (Matthew 26:74).

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Later they failed to recognize him — "They saw him, but somehow did not recognize him" (Luke 24:16). Feeling alone and frightened, they assembled to support each other in their confusion. And they gathered frequently to pray as a group (Acts 1:14).

Eventually, the ones on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. In this same way, I am called to recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. It no longer matters if I am alone or with others, whether I see Jesus or not. As long as I am able to recognize him in the breaking of the bread I am at peace.

The Eucharist is our sign of belonging. I no longer need to be sitting with the ones I love, or to visit the graves of those who have gone before. Jesus is present to me in the Eucharist. He has come back and now he remains with us forever.

Some worry that there is a shortage of vocations to the religious life and the priesthood. But we can be confident that God will always provide ministers of the Eucharist to provide that visible sign of his ongoing presence. The form may change. And their behavior may need to be changed. But God is always with us in the Eucharist.

It is the same way with our faith. We lived through Good Friday with him and we rejoiced in Easter Sunday. Now we await his going back to Heaven at his Ascension and — as he promised — he will not leave us orphans. He will send a great one to be our companion and advocate. Now we await the Spirit to strengthen and convince us. We have prayed with Julian of Norwich, "All will be well."

Now is the time for me to adopt Songlit's conviction ... and let a little child lead me!

[Frances Hayes is a Presentation Sister living in Samson, Western Australia. She worked at the Apostolic Nunciature in Bangkok from 1995 to 2000. She then returned to Australia to minister as a support worker in aged care, a volunteer teaching assistant with refugee women and children, and a volunteer in an organization that builds connections with homeless and vulnerable people.]