“Disruption” is the word that kept coming back to me, over and over, this past week as I read the lessons for this morning. “Disruption” — an unexpected, and often unwelcome, change in circumstances, a change in the normal way of things, an upset of expectations and plans. It is also the word that seems to sum up where we find ourselves in the Church Year. In one of our readings, the disruptions are quite evident; in another it provides the backdrop; and, in yet another, while directly, or indirectly absent, it raises a significant question for us who are members of a text-based, historical, religious tradition, Anglican Christianity, in specific.

So, where we are in the Church Year? We are still in the season of Easter, “Eastertide” as the older language might put it. But, more precisely, we are a few days past the Feast of the Ascension. Our tradition tells us that, after Christ died (that is, a significant disruption), he was raised and spent time with his disciples in his resurrected form (disruption averted). Then, forty days later, he ascended . . . leaving his disciples looking up into the heavens, no doubt wondering what was coming next.

The Ascension was, therefore, the second great “disruption” the disciples faced in their relationship with Jesus. This period of time—this Ascensiontide (in the older language)—then, was a period of absence; a period of doubt, perhaps of despair, for Jesus’ followers. It was a period predicted by Jesus, as we heard last week: that Jesus was leaving, but that the Father would send some mysterious Paraklete (not “parakeet”) to them. It was a period reflected in our Collect for today: “Do not leave us comfortless”, which of course, assumes some “discomfort”! Disruption is uncomfortable, no doubt. And it raises the question as to how we respond.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles show a couple of possible reactions to disruption. As we heard, there was a slave-girl in Phillipi who had “a spirit of divination”. People would pay for her services as a fortune-teller, and she “brought her owners a great deal of money” (16.16). She was, for some reason attracted to Paul and Silas, but so annoyed them, that they cast the spirit out of her. With that spirit of divination gone, so was the slave-girl’s ability to provide her owners with their source of income. In other words, their life, their livelihood, was disrupted.
What was their response? Outrage and vengeance! They went to the leaders of the city and accused Paul and Silas of “disturbing our city; [being] Jews and . . . advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe” (16.20-21). That is, instead of accusing Paul and Silas of casting out a spirit, they manufactured some odd charge — a charge of “disrupting” civil order — that got Paul and Silas flogged and thrown into prison. The slave-girl and her owners then disappear from the story, but you have to wonder whether or not the owners’ response to the disruption restored their fortune. We don’t know, but what we can see it a pattern of deflection that we probably can recognize fairly easily. But does it work?

Further on in our reading from Acts, we see another reaction to disruption. Consider the poor jailer! Yes, he had a job to, and there’s every indication that he did his job well. Okay, he got some new prisoners (that is, Paul and Silas), but things were probably pretty predictable. And then, when least expected . . . a powerful earthquake—major disruption. Responsible jailer that he was, he went to check on his prisoners, and noticed that ALL of the prison doors were open. His expectation was that everyone would have fled; he would be held responsible. Nothing good could be anticipated. His response to his disruption: Escape (rather drastically)! Fall upon the sword! Fortunately for him, Paul intervened.

We see a different response to disruption in the background of our reading from the Gospel of John. John’s Gospel, as I’ve pointed out before, was written several generations after Jesus’ death, resurrection AND ascension. In other words, John’s Gospel is partially a response to the “disruption” that the Teacher’s physical absence presented. Not peculiar to John’s situation, but reflected there, is a tendency to “dig in one’s heels”, or to “circle the wagons”—that is, to become insular—when our source of stability has been removed.

Many early Christians clearly wanted the turmoil, the disruption, the arguments over how to follow Jesus, to end. Some reverted to those things in their past that gave them stability, perhaps a slavish faithfulness to Jewish legal requirements. Others, equally early on, went in another direction: “We’re free to do anything we want!” Both of those options fractured the Christian community. John’s Gospel, and the frequent appeals by Jesus in his last words to his disciples, are an extended appeal for love for one another to be the response to disruption. A unity based on love and compassion, a unity based on a common, Paraklete/Holy Spirit, discernment, is the answer that Jesus, in John’s Gospel, suggests as an answer to disruption.
So, the question to us, in the light of our history and tradition is: “How DO we make sense of things in times of disruption?” Of course, it is a question we have to answer personally. But it’s also a question we have to address as a community of faith. We could look to Paul and Silas. They, too, were affected by the same earthquake as was their jailer. But, rather than choose the “escape” option that the jailer immediately (if a bit drastically) wanted to adopt, they chose a different response. They seemed to recognize that God was providing options through the earthquake, options for the future, for ministry. And they chose to wait, to do the “right thing” (in their circumstances). What transpired no one could have expected: the conversion of the jailer and his household.

A similar, though broader, disruption that early Christians had to deal with has faced the Church ever since Jesus ascended: once we’ve lost physical association with our Leader, how do we respond? We’ve experienced our earthquakes; we’ve had our foundations shaken. Whether it has been the Crusades, the Salem witch trials, Darwin and evolution, or the Enlightenment, or changing social morés, or scandals rocking religious institutions, Christianity—including this congregation—has had to ask “Where are our foundations? Upon what can we depend?” And, many times, it seems to me, that we’ve ignored Jesus’ hopeful promise and instructions, and have looked to double down on old rules and practices. And, sometimes, I have to nod my head in agreement when I read the statistics about folks fleeing organized religion; they just don’t see anything hopeful; they don’t see anything relevant.

This disruption to relevance was observed a number of years ago in Jewish scholar and mystic Abraham Joshua Heschel’s wonderful book entitled *God in Search for Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955). He wrote:

“It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion--its message becomes meaningless.”
What Heschel is challenging us—Christians as well as Jews—is to recognize that, at times of disruption, the answer is NOT to hunker down. It is NOT to stress being “good” instead of being “disciples” (as Bp. Kym told our confirmands yesterday) — that is, NOT to fall back on morality instead of justice. Heschel, and our world, are asking us to recognize that God spoke to the biblical writers in their time and in their world to answer the questions of that environment. We have the witness of that human/divine encounter, and we are invited, in our study of Scripture and Tradition, to discern how God is speaking to our disruptions, in OUR time.

The religious crisis of our time was also explored in Leonard Bernstein’s brilliant 1971 stage-work “Mass”. In the ninth section of the composition, entitled “God Said”, the Celebrant of the Mass, channeling the feelings of the people, sings:

God made us the boss.
God gave us the cross.
We turned it into a sword.
To spread the word of the lord.
We used his holy decree.
To do whatever we please.

The point of his “sermon” was that that kind of interpretation didn’t, and doesn’t work. As his despair increases, later on, he breaks the pottery chalice and patten, and then notes, “How easily things get broken”. That is, how easily things are disrupted. But, then, he observes that, in the broken pieces lie the materials for creating a better future . . . if only we look at them differently.

So, what is our response, then, to disruption? I have no magic wand; there are no easy answers. But our Ascensiontide ends with Pentecost, the celebration of the coming of the Spirit that will guide us into all truth. That truth we can discern through our Scripture, our tradition and our reason — our Anglican three-legged stool. We can discern it through Spirit-filled, and Spirit-led prayer and discussion. But we have to remember that the wind, the Spirit, blows where it will, as John wrote earlier in his Gospel (3.8). Our charge, as a church, when faced with disruption, is to weigh anchor, to catch that wind, and to sail into God’s future.

Amen.