

## Easter at the End of the World

With the internet full of jokes about “apocalypse shopping” and health experts countering our dark humor with pleading assurance that we can avoid annihilation by staying inside and washing our hands, we might find ourselves soberly realizing that, while it may not be the end of *the* world, it is certainly the end of *a* world.

I began writing this on Good Friday, the day I finally felt able to write about what had happened two days before, when we learned that my healthy, brilliant, successful, 24-year old cousin had died a sudden and shocking death. While I don’t have much scientific knowledge from which to respond to the virus-generated question “is the world ending?”, I can tell you that for at least a dozen members of my small and close-knit family on Wednesday, and for the families of at least 108,862 pandemic victims around the world, the answer is yes.

I don’t write the above line in order to sound poetic, or to indicate that each loss brings inevitable despair. By “world” here I mean a unique mode of existence: when a new loved one enters my life, my world changes because *I* must change, my behaviors and ways of thinking must change, in response. So, too, when loved ones leave. Grief, which until now I had only really experienced in relatively trivial forms—the loss of a pet, or a romantic relationship, or a hometown—is, at its core, a longing for the world as it was before. It is a longing for the world in which our deceased are still alive, the world where we can hear about their day and cook them dinner and touch their hair. It is said that the first stage of grief is denial, and I imagine that this is not because we shy away from pain—many of us are well acquainted with pain. I imagine we at first deny a loss for completely pragmatic reasons; we have just left one world and entered a new one, and in this new world we do not yet know how to move about.

I think this is why others cannot comfort us in times of great loss. Not that the presence of others is unimportant—having people to lament with is one of the great gifts of a human life. But others cannot make loss *better*. Something we learn with the death of a loved one is that the existence of our world hangs on the continued presence of each and every person we love. This is, I think, an important part of what it *means* to love someone: to hang your world on their presence. Attempts to bring comfort by relaying a positive or hopeful message can often backfire. I was raised in a devoutly religious family, where such (well-intended) responses to death were common—“He’s with Jesus now! You will see him again!”. In a text I sent to my cousins—sisters of the deceased—I told them that they could feel free to mourn without attaching a hopeful flourish to their emotions. “Thanks,” they responded. “We hate that bullshit.” And indeed, visions of hope never appear more empty platitudinous, more like bullshit, than when delivered in a time of deep loss. A loss, an end of the world, obscures any vision we may have had of an eschaton, even as it increases our longing for it.

An acquaintance of mine recently wrote that we shouldn’t treat Good Friday as a lead-up to Easter. Knowing the ending of the story prevents us from grasping the true depth of loss and despair, seeing the death only as a period of waiting before the healing, before the redemption. But it is exactly this future perspective that the disciples lacked in the story of the original Good Friday, and it is exactly this perspective that we lack access to when our world dies along with a loved one.

Like my family, the story of Good Friday is the story of a group of a dozen or so people whose world ended with the loss of a dear loved one. Though they may have had a sort of abstract hope in Jesus's eventual... something? But the gospel accounts are clear about the ignorance of the disciples, who struggled to envision a world beyond the one they knew—a world beyond the one that was ending.

This year's especially somber Easter found us longing for a world that has ended. This may lead us to a better understanding of the desire for a heaven as the desire for the resurrection and redemption of the world *as it was before*. For our family, and countless other families around the world, the feeling of Good Friday did not entirely dissipate on Easter. It is okay to wait in our grief over the passing of the world as it was before, and to long for (to borrow from T.S. Eliot),

*echoed ecstasy,  
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony  
Of death and birth.*