

6 Easter A 2020

Acts 17:22-31

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

What are you reading these days?

What are you watching?

As the weeks wear on,

Are you looking for solace, or stimulation?

Does the world seem devoid of meaning?

Or – is there some vibrating possibility?

Do you see a future?

These are some of my questions.

What are yours?

Because none of us have ever been here before.

Yes, there have been plagues before.

Yes, there have been times of economic depression,

Political turmoil,

Times of dislocation and loneliness and uncertainty.

But these are our times,

And we wonder all over again,

Who are we?

Where are we going?

Who's going with us?

We may talk about what we're watching and reading,

We may even name some fears

And give voice to fond hopes,

But underneath all the talk,

There lurks the basic question:

Are we alone?

Have we been abandoned here,

In a sickening world,

Leaderless, without a clear way forward?

This must have been how the disciples felt.

Caught between fear and hope,

Not wanting to be left alone.

Jesus promises, in these last days

Before he ascends into heaven,\*  
That he will not leave us orphaned –  
Or comfortless,  
As it says  
In the translation still so familiar to many of us.

Jesus says,  
I will not leave you comfortless.  
I'll send you the Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit is hard to hold on to sometimes,  
Especially when we are isolated, lonely,  
Longing for a hug.

We're human. We live as bodies  
In a world we touch.  
We are all, in some ways,  
Like the little girl who was afraid of the dark.  
Don't leave me,  
She said to her mother,  
Night after night.

Oh, honey, said her mother,  
You know God is always here with you.

Yes, said the little girl,  
But I want someone with skin on them.

We are like that little girl,  
Most of us.  
We want someone with skin on them  
To help us face the dark.

The disciples were just the same.  
They didn't know,  
In this moment just before Jesus went away again,  
What the future would hold,  
What they were supposed to do,  
Who would help them figure it out.

Of course we know the next chapter of their story,  
And it's coming again soon –  
The descent of the dove,  
The tongues of flame,  
The Advocate, the Comforter,  
Coming to inspire and guide them.

They didn't know beforehand, though,  
Any more than we know the next chapter of our own story.  
But we can learn from theirs.

We can learn from the great adventure stories,  
What they did in the power of the invisible,  
Untouchable Holy Spirit,  
Who, in the words of one contemporary theologian,  
Is always drawing near, and passing by.\*\*

The Holy Spirit, drawing near and passing by,  
Leaves behind a trail of hope we can follow,  
New breath to sustain, new courage to speak,  
Words with which to tell why we have hope.

If you have hope,  
Be ready – as one lesson says today –  
Be ready to give an account  
Of the hope that is in you.

Yes, we all have hopes here and now.  
We hope that there will be more tests soon.  
We hope that there will be treatment soon.  
We hope there will be a vaccine.  
We hope there will be a free and fair election.  
We hope that there will be safe work,  
Fairly compensated, for all who need or want it.  
We hope some things that were precious will be restored.  
These hopes are real.

But this is not the hope  
For which we will be called to account.

We will called to give an account  
For the great soaring hope  
That is the heart of our faith:  
The hope that we are not alone,  
The hope that there is more,  
That there is, beyond all this,  
An absolute good  
That wills our good,  
That cannot be stopped,  
That will come for us,  
Comfort us,  
Stay with us,

And never let us go.  
This is our hope.

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Proclaiming that hope,  
Giving an account for the hope that is in us,  
Is our great and daunting task.

Whether we feel hopeful or not;  
We are a people of hope.  
It's not about optimism;  
It's not about being nice or well-meaning  
Or doing our part.  
What matters is this:  
We are a people of hope.

If we fall short of this truth,  
We have failed in our sacred trust.  
The resurrection of Jesus from the dead  
Means that we are born anew,  
Every day,  
To a living hope.

Bearing witness to this truth  
Is not a comfortable thing.  
Even Paul fell short.  
The story we hear this morning,  
Is the record of his failure.

Thorough years of prayer and formation  
Paul had become a powerful and effective evangelist,  
Telling the story of Jesus, crucified and risen,  
The wisdom of God made foolish for our sake.

But when he came to Athens,  
He changed his tune.  
In the kingdom of philosophy,  
He spoke only of wisdom,  
And left out the folly,  
Thinking the divine folly of our story would weaken his case.  
So he failed in his one great task.  
He gave no account  
Of the radical hope that was in him,  
And his words fell short.  
When he preached in other cities,  
They flocked in their hundreds and thousands

To the waters of baptism.  
In Athens,  
The philosophers said,  
We will hear more of this.  
And a few, on another day, were persuaded.

Paul never made that mistake again.  
When he went on to the community at Corinth,  
He resolved to know nothing among them  
But Christ Jesus, and him crucified.  
And the people of that world-weary,  
Bustling, disease-ridden city  
Flocked, in their thousands, to the waters of baptism.

What is our task, in this world-weary,  
Disease-ridden time?  
How do we confront the liars?  
How do we reach the despairing?

Do we offer bland words of comfort?  
Vaguely hopeful platitudes  
That at least create some sense of fellow feeling?  
There is nothing really wrong with that.

But we can do more.  
I am not saying –  
Though I may be called to account for this –  
I am not saying  
It is our task to bring everyone into our household of faith.

What I am saying,  
To myself  
Perhaps more than to anyone else,  
Is that if we do not tell our story of faith,  
In clear and compelling words,  
Words and power given to us  
By the Holy Spirit  
Who is coming soon,  
If we do not give an account for the hope that is in us,  
Then there is an empty spot  
In this lonely world,  
Where our testimony should be.

This lonely world needs the testimony of many faiths.  
Submission to the will of the Holy One.  
Right actions that lead to the repair of the cosmos.

The life, death, and renewed life of the Holy as one of us.  
All of these instill courage.  
All create communities.  
All offer peace in the midst of suffering.

Our way is this:  
We follow the one who joined together  
The infinite and the time-bound,  
The eternal and earth-bound,  
Into one being who suffered, died,  
Robbed death of its power,  
And lives among us now.

Because this happened,  
We are limited, but not trapped.  
Sorrowful, but not destroyed.  
Weary, but ready to go on.

Let's not be like Paul in Athens,  
Selling ourselves short  
By mincing our words.  
We have something precious  
To hold and share.

Hold that precious gift close for now,  
If, like many of us,  
You are in need of comfort.  
But the Holy Spirit is coming soon.  
And then anything could happen.  
A wild hope – and true.  
I hope.

\*Though this address of Jesus is set at the Last Supper, it is generally understood to be the voice of the post-Resurrection Jesus. (see *Brown*, etc)

\*\*Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*