

“Seeking, Fumbling, Finding”
Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21; I Peter 3:13-22
Easter 6/Baptism/Concluding Sunday of UA Worship Season

John 14:15-21

Jesus said to the disciples,

¹⁵‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

Introduction to I Peter

The letters of Peter were written at a time and in circumstances where it was not only dangerous to be a Christian but terribly divisive. Families would turn on family members who were following what was at that time called the Way. So there was not only a physical, but an emotional risk for those who chose to join the community that followed the risen Jesus, about half a century after the crucifixion.

Writing in the trusted name of Peter, these words were delivered as encouragement to the members of that young and beleaguered church:

I Peter 3:13-22

¹³Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Acts 17:22-31

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,

‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.”

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

²⁸For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have

the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

The Sermon

It was late in the day on a recent Monday afternoon,ⁱ and a typically disparate crowd were scattered around a large coffee shop with a dining area: students, diners, a semi-organized group of apparently dedicated cribbage players, all kinds of people talking and shuffling papers and checking their cell phones.

At one point, intermingled in the conversational hum of a busy restaurant and the intrusive, commercial jazz being piped in from the loudspeakers, another sound began to emerge. Like a buoy bobbing in the water, breaking the surface and then being covered over and then appearing again, a teasingly faint sound, like two little girls singing a playground song, would almost emerge for a few seconds, and then be drowned out again by the surrounding noise.

As the coffee shop continued to hum, that sound would re-emerge, tantalizingly close to being identifiable, only to disappear again just when those paying attention thought they were about to be able to discern what it was.

That pattern continued for a while, vacillating between moments when you were afraid they had finished and moved their attention on to other something else, and then a sigh of relief when the singing would start back up again.

As the minutes went by, their voices gradually became stronger, occasionally rising to just enough of a crescendo that strangers’ eyes would meet and nods of mutual approval would be exchanged.

The sound re-submerged, and the next time it came up, their voices were a little bit louder again; and now it was clear it wasn’t a playground jingle. It sounded a little more like children singing in church, but you couldn’t quite grasp the words they were singing.

And then it became even more clear: they were singing in Hebrew, and the lilting, intriguing melody lines suggested two very young women preparing for bat mitzvah.

One man could bear the suspense no longer and made a long trip around the restaurant under the pretense of going to get a coffee refill. As he walked past the table where the sound had been coming from, he saw that it was a girl working with an adult teacher; they were poring over an open binder with Hebrew words written on the open page.

Not wanting to intrude, but unable to withhold his gratitude, to his surprise he found himself struggling to restrain his emotions as he expressed his thanks to them for having, for a few blessed minutes, turned a mundane, public area into sacred space, and brought God's presence into the consciousness of a roomful of preoccupied people going about their daily business.

What some have worshiped as unknown,
this Paul proclaimed to people in Athens
who were not at all dissimilar to that crowd
who were finding themselves transported at the coffee shop;
and this Luke, the author of Acts, proclaims to us;
and this, it is my profoundest honor and privilege to repeat to you:

The God who made the world and everything in it, the prime figure of heaven and earth, is not confined to shrines made by human hands, but in fact gives to all mortals life and breath and all things,

who from one ancestor made all nations to inhabit the whole earth,
and allotted the times of their existence,
and the boundaries of the places where they would live,

so that they would search for the Deity,
and perhaps grope for and find
their Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer—
even though, truthfully, God is not far from anyone.

We can rightly wonder what the daily concerns of those people in Athens were—probably not at all different from the concerns we carry around with us:

They worried about their parents and their children
and their spouses and their friends;
they wondered if their employment would hold out,
and if not, what would happen to them and their families;

they dealt with the physical realities of getting sick,
or breaking down, or getting older;
they were distracted by the states of their various relationships
with friends and enemies, love interests and co-workers and competitors;
And sometimes, they wrestled with the darkness,
the darkness that comes when people feel alone,
or uncomfortable with themselves,
or frustrated at their circumstances;
when they wonder what in the world they are even doing anymore.

And it would be nice to be able to say that we have a message that automatically improves all of those circumstances, and all anybody has to do for that to happen is just sign on to it.

Some people have claimed that that *is* our message. I vividly remember one day, almost thirty years ago, hearing a Christian rock band or praise group or something singing a gloriously moronic song whose chorus included the line, “With Jesus, all our troubles disappear!” Get a bucket.

Since the very beginning, Christians have been bumping up against the reality that our earthly circumstances are not the measuring stick of how faithful we are, or how much God loves us, or the fact that Jesus died for us;

and even though we at least know something of who God is,
we do still seek and grope around as if reaching out our arms in a pitch dark room, trying to find something familiar or steady to hold onto.

In the Fifth century, an anonymous Christian writer, who was once thought to be Dionysius, spoke not about divine light, but about the “Divine Darkness,” and prayed,

“Supernal Triad,
Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness;
Guide of Christians to Divine Wisdom,
direct our path to the ultimate summit of Thy mystical Lord,
most incomprehensible, most luminous, and most exalted,
where the pure, absolute, and immutable mysteries of theology
are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence,
outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness...”ⁱⁱ

A thousand years later, Martin Luther believed that Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate indicator that God deliberately and especially works on our behalf not through triumph and happiness and brightness and victory, but from a hidden place, so that a faithful person knows that all they have is God.ⁱⁱⁱ

God works specifically in the places where we feel like we are falling apart, where we are "discovering the limits of [our] power instead of its possibilities. [That] means that God is always involved with people and situations exactly as they currently are, instead of as they could be or might be or used to be."^{iv}

Sometimes, even in places saturated with God's presence, where the veil between the everyday and the divine is said to be unusually thin,

we want for that voice of a young girl
mastering the ancient faithful tradition
to make our spaces truly sacred.

And all we can do is reach out, groping around in what feels like emptiness.

Maybe that's just the right time for a Christian to be part of a baptism, and to remember our own, and to think about what our baptism means to each of us.

Maybe the times when we feel like we're searching and groping around in darkness are the ideal time to celebrate the Resurrection, when the high emotion of Holy Week and the lilies of Easter Sunday are distant memories of a different season:

reaching out into the darkness, the confusion, the rootlessness, the storms;

knowing that our infinitely mysterious yet intimately knowable God is there—
there with arms of love to catch you and hold you and never let you go—

there in the darkness, there in the details, there in the diagnosis,
there in the news that makes people never want to pick up the phone
or answer the doorbell again,

there even in the silence of wonder;

there even in the silence of absence, rejection, and self-doubt.

We remember to cling to that presence
every time a priest, preacher, pastor or presbyter

places a handful of water gently but visibly and generously
on the head of a tiny, vulnerable child of wonder
and says with certainty:

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and Holy Ghost;
Child of the covenant, you are marked with the sign of the covenant,
and sealed as Christ’s own forever.”

Bill Bryson wrote not long ago about his love of travel, and tried to articulate something about the difficult-to-define reason for it. He said,

“I especially love that sense of not knowing quite what is going on, of being in a place where mundane things— an advertisement at a bus shelter, a snack from a street stall, the giant insect that lands on your shirtsleeve and preens its luminous wings—become fascinating, alarming, delightful, amusing, or otherwise notable...”

By way of illustration, he said, “Some years ago the London Times sent me to Japan....

“On my next-to-last day in the country, I flew into Tokyo from Sapporo and needed to get to Tokyo’s main railroad station, called Shinjuku. I climbed into a taxi at the airport and said to the driver, ‘Shinjuku station, please.’

“He didn’t seem to have any idea what I meant. I repeated my request, as articulately as I could, and he looked at me as if I had asked him to take me to Boise. I pulled a map of Tokyo out and showed him Shinjuku station. He studied this with a look of great dissatisfaction, but at length put the car in gear and we set off.

‘We drove for what seemed hours through the endless, numbing sprawl of Tokyo. Eventually we entered a long, deep tunnel—a kind of underground freeway, it seemed. About a mile along, the driver pulled into an emergency parking bay and stopped. He pointed to a metal door cut into the tunnel wall and indicated that I should get out and go through that door.

“‘You want me to go through that door?’ I said in disbelief.

“He nodded robustly and presented me with a bill for about a zillion yen. Everything was beginning to seem [surreal]. He took my money, gave me several small bills in change, and encouraged me to depart, with a little shooing gesture.

This was crazy. We were in a tunnel, for crying out loud. If I got out and he drove off, I would be hundreds of feet under Tokyo in a busy traffic tunnel with no sidewalk or other escape. You'll understand when I say this didn't feel entirely right.

“Through that door there?” I said again, dubiously.

“He nodded and made another shooing gesture.

“I got out with my suitcase and went up three metal steps to the door and turned the handle. The door opened. I looked back at the driver. He nodded in encouragement. Ahead of me, lit with what seemed emergency lighting, was the longest flight of stairs I had ever seen.

“It took a very long while to climb them all.

“At the top I came to another door, exactly like the one at the bottom. I turned the handle and cautiously opened it, then stepped out onto the concourse of the world's busiest railway station.”

He said, “I don't know whether this is the way lots of people get to Shinjuku or whether I am the only person in history ever to have done so. But what I do know is this: it's why I like to travel.”^v

Beloved friends, may your journey in this life deliver you safely to your appropriate destination.

Sometimes we will come to surprising doors that don't look anything like what we expected. But God knows the way, even if, to us, it appears unfamiliar.

When, in spite of your previous assumptions, those surprising doors are the right way for you to go, may their handles turn easily.

May there be enough light to illuminate dark passageways.

May the next doorway out of that transition open up just as easily for you into the new life and circumstances to which you are called.

And may you love not only your destination, but the journey, its unknown contours navigated by the God who is, to you, very well known.

In all the ways we Presbyterians observe our faith—
in sacramental worship, in our responsibility to the Word,
in our everyday faithfulness to God and to our neighbors—

the Christian life is a constant process of looking through a glass darkly, trying to look into a dim mirror to find the holy of holies, the still small voice, the Almighty Creator who set the limits of the heavens and operates within the elements of every atom in our bodies.

We are groping our way toward faithfulness, fumblingly trying to get it right.

As he began his long goodbye to the disciples who had followed him all the way to Jerusalem, all the way on his journey to the cross, Jesus reminded them, “If you love me, you *will* keep my commandments.”

We do know him, and have seen him. “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”

May you always be blessed in the act of reaching out in darkness with the confidence of one who knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is in it somewhere.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
May 21, 2017

ⁱ In fact it was the Monday before this sermon was delivered, May 15, 2017, at the Atlanta Bread Company on Hendersonville Road in Asheville.

ⁱⁱ William P Anderson and Richard L. Diesslin, “Pseudo-Dionysius,” in Anderson and Diesslin, eds., *A Journey Through Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 58-59. Originally published in “Mystical Theology 1,3,” *The Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. Fintry, Brook & Godalming (Surrey, England: Shrine of Wisdom, 1949), 9, 11, 15-17.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Reformation (1500-1650)*, Vol. VI, Part 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2016), 40-41.

^{iv} Author unidentified, “Theology of the Cross,” Mockingbird, www.mbird.com/glossary/theology-of-the-cross/ (Retrieved May 20, 2017 10:00 A.M.)

^v Bryson, Bill. “Introduction,” in Bryson, ed., *The Best American Travel Writing 2016* (Kindle Locations 250-275). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Kindle Edition.