

“Out of Darkness”
I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
Easter 5

John 14:1-14

[Jesus said to the disciples,] ¹‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.’

⁵Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’

⁶Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’

⁸Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’

⁹Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

¹In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

²Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

³You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name’s sake, lead me and guide me,

⁴take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

⁵Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

¹⁵My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

I Peter 2:2-10

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁶For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” ⁸and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

The Sermon

I am just seeing an article titled, “These Are the Things That New Yorkers Achingly Miss:”

“To hop on the train, any train, earbuds intact, alone in the crowd on the way somewhere else. To walk out of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, exhausted as if from a march...

“The coffee-cart guy on West 40th Street who remembers you take it black.

“Sunday Mass and the bakery after. Seeing old friends in the synagogue. Play dates... Hugs...

“The cheap seats in the outfield.

“Meeting cousins with a soccer ball in Brooklyn Bridge Park. The din of the theater as you scan the Playbill before the lights go down.

“‘I miss my gym equipment,’ said [someone in] Brooklyn Heights.

“‘The lamb over rice from the food cart by my office, at Seventh and 49th,’ said [someone in] East Harlem.

“‘Just everything,’ sighed a police officer sitting behind the wheel of his vehicle in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, last week. ‘I miss everything.’”ⁱ

If you were asked that question by an interviewer—what parts of your day or week or life do you achingly miss, from the way things were up until a couple months ago—what are some specific things that come to mind?

Sometime between the year 70 and the year 90,

long enough after the resurrection for Christianity to have started to become widespread geographically,ⁱⁱ but still early enough that individuals and communities who embraced it were suffering enormous social consequences for doing so,

someone writing under the trusted name of Peter offered resilience and encouragement to those early Christians whose lives and patience and endurance—and, maybe, whose faith—were being severely tested by the circumstances in which they were having to adapt to a new and dangerous environment.

Remember how Peter had preached to the crowds that Pentecost day, decades earlier, when the Holy Spirit swooshed into the house where the disciples were staying, and equipped them to go out and speak the good news to a vast diversity of people of different languages and origins?

I notice this later writer, somewhere within ten years of the year 80, chose Peter's name in which to write, saying to a different diverse crowd:

“Once, you were not *a people*,
but now you are *God's* people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.”

“You are a *chosen* race, a royal priesthood,
a holy *nation*, God's own people,
in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts
of him who called you out of darkness
into his marvelous light.”

Out of darkness, into God's marvelous light.

Even in this gorgeous springtime, even on sunny days, this time can feel like darkness, like we are all living in (hopefully reasonably well appointed) caves, if only from the standpoint that we're all having to keep to our individual dwelling places: sequestered, more or less quarantined to one degree or another.

And we've arrived at a point where the initial enthusiasm for getting in there and digging deep and doing what's necessary—that initial burst of, “OK, gang, let's all work together and figure out how to do this”—that burst slowly gives way to impatience, with the realization that, yeah, this is going to be a longer-term proposition than we are psychically prepared for.

It's not easy, from any perspective, and some have it much worse than others, but there is literally no one who is not having to work their way through it.

And even on sunny days, it does still feel something like darkness.

In the dark of the night before he was to be crucified, after supper, Jesus said to the disciples in the long discourse that occupies several chapters of John's gospel:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

“Heart” imagery going back deep into Old Testament times didn't refer to an involuntary emotional reaction that you can't help; nor was it just the idea of gusto or stick-to-it-iveness—“Put your heart into it!”

Heart imagery was about will.

Far from indicating an *involuntary* response, it is, by definition, the *opposite* of involuntary. The word “voluntary” is rooted in the word “would;” “I would” is related to “I will,” as in, “this is what I intend—what I *want*—to do: I *will* do it,” or, “it is my *will* to do it.”

The metaphor of “heart” in Biblical times was a matter of the will: volition.

Jesus said to his followers in the darkness: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Do not let your will be disturbed, as still water is disturbed (John 5:7), or as the base and craven emotions of a crowd can be “stirred up” (Acts 17:8).

Don't let that happen to your will.

As Jesus prepared for what he knew lay just ahead for him—

the culminating act of his self-sacrificing love for all creation and all humankind, even the ones whose irrational fears made them despise

him, even the ones whose machinations were about to send him to his death—

as he prepared to meet the cross, and tried, in his final hours with his friends and disciples, to prepare them, as much as he could, for the challenges that would come after—

he wasn't saying, "there, there," hoping they wouldn't wring their hands too long.

He reminded them that love for each other and for the whole world—divine love, holy love, resilient love—is a matter of will.

Just a little while earlier, he had said to them, I give you a new commandment: that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not lose your will.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house, there are many dwelling-places.

Even here and now, in our many and various and separate and sometimes lonely dwelling places,

Jesus calls us out of darkness, and into his marvelous light.

Throughout millennia, Psalm 31 has given voice to God's people in all kinds of circumstances:

In you, O LORD, I seek refuge. My times are in your hand.

Eugene Peterson interpretively translated Psalm 31 this way:

I run to you, God; I run for dear life.

Don't let me down!
Take me seriously this time!
Get down on my level and listen,
and please—no procrastination!
Your granite cave a hiding place,
your high cliff aerie a place of safety.

You're my cave to hide in,
my cliff to climb.
Be my safe leader,
be my true mountain guide.
Free me from hidden traps;
I want to hide in you.
I've put my life in your hands.
You won't drop me,
you'll never let me down.

Hour by hour I place my days in your hand,
safe from the hands out to get me.
Warm me, your servant, with a smile;
save me because you love me.ⁱⁱⁱ

Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Believe in God,
believe also in the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
Amen.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ Michael Wilson, "These Are the Things That New Yorkers Achingly Miss" New York Times May 9, 2020, Updated 9:52 a.m. ET (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/nyregion/new-yorkers-missing-nyc-coronavirus.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>)

ⁱⁱ David L. Balch, "The First Letter of Peter," in Wayne Meeks, ed., The HarperCollins Study Bible (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2277

