

Title: Abiding Hope

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Scripture: [Romans 8:23-39](#)

Text: [John 14:15-21](#)

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We are in-between. That's what makes things so difficult right now. Often, the hardest place to be at any point in life is in-between. We are in-between the identification of Covid-19 and the cure of the virus. We are in-between things being completely shut-down and fully open again. We are in-between the way things used to be and the ways things

eventually will be. Because we are creatures of hope, hard-wired to be future-oriented, we always look for a better tomorrow. Being in-between without clarity about a timeline or what things will eventually look like can smother hope. It can steal it away from you. For at least one person, that's a description of hell. Do you remember the plaque over the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno*? "Abandon hope, all you who enter." It's hell not to have hope.

This is why we are studying hope. Right now, with a pandemic and an economic crisis, we need hope. We need it not just for our health and well-being. As followers of Jesus, we need to be giving hope away rather than frantically searching for it. If ever there was a time when the world needs the hope we have in Christ Jesus, it is now.

So we are becoming students of hope by looking at Easter stories. Unfortunately, we don't have a lot to work with. There are precious few stories of post-resurrection encounters with Jesus. Even though we know of numerous occasions where Jesus appeared, one with over 500 people present, just a few are recorded. So for the last two weeks, we begin doing what the early followers did. We are reflecting on what Jesus said and did in light of Easter.

It's like that movie in 1999, the second highest-grossing film that year, behind *Star Wars Phantom Menace*. Do you remember what it was? Well, this isn't Jeopardy. I won't make you write down your answer while Schulyer plays in the background. I'll tell you. It was *Sixth Sense*; I loved it. I warn you; I'm going to give the ending away. If you are bothered by this, mute

the sound for the next 30 seconds. I'll give you a thumbs up when safe to join us again.

Bruce Willis stars as a child psychologist who is working with a little boy. The child is terrified because he sees dead people, only they don't know they are dead. Bruce Willis with compassion and care saves the little boy by teaching him that he has a spiritual gift, helping dead people. What Bruce Willis doesn't know until the end, what you don't know until the end, is Bruce Willis himself is one of the dead people. No one saw that coming and it was such an amazing way to end the story that you want to immediately go back and watch it again because every scene, every line has a different significance because you know the ending. ¹ I offer a thumbs up for those who muted me. You can return.

For the disciples, it was just like that. His followers had to go back over everything he said and did in light of this earth-shattering wow of Easter. They did it to understand and they did it to find hope. They went back over everything. Jesus said he was the Good Shepherd who would lay down his life and he was and did. It gave them hope.

Jesus said he was going away to prepare a place for them and would come back again and it gave them hope. But of course, if Jesus was leaving, that meant they were too would find themselves in-between Jesus going away to prepare that place for them and Jesus returning to take them there. And in-between can be hard, scary, and lonely.

They remembered that Jesus said, "Don't worry; don't be afraid. I won't leave you alone. I won't abandon you. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." (John 14:16) Call him the counselor, the helper, or a guide, to live with you, to be with you. Call him the Spirit of truth because when you are in-between, what you need more than anything is the truth.

Boy, do we know that right now. What we want more than anything is true, but if you look at the polls about who we believe and trust, who we think is truthful, the only one over 50% percent is Dr. Anthony Fauci and at least a quarter of Americans don't think he's believable. It's sad and it is reflective not just in how difficult it is to get our heads around what's happening in this in-between time of crisis but it also reflects the contentious time leading up to the pandemic. Even though we think this is unique, it's not. There were just as many challenges in Jesus' time with people believing all sorts of things. It's why he said that this truth isn't about science or politics or facts but of about faith. "This 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." (John 14:17)

Jesus was helping them for the in-between time and if they loved him, if they kept his commandments, the Spirit would move in them, sustaining them and they would have, at their very center, an abiding hope. God was going to walk with them into a future which would be better than the present in-between time. Jesus didn't say they wouldn't suffer. They would. He didn't say that wouldn't worry. They did. He didn't say there would never be hard times. There were. He said, "I'm not abandoning you. I won't leave you. I will abide with you and this gave them hope through the many tough times that were to come.

We forget that. We forget that for most of the people in the history of the world, what we are going through isn't unique. We have been so protected by the blessings of our modern life, that we lose sight of the fact that earthquakes and plagues, famines and wars that have ravaged humanity and changed the course of history, time and again. It's a big reason that this in-between time is hard for us. We have never seen anything like this. But the early Christians had and they had the added challenge right out of the gate of persecution. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is stoned for his faith. Acts records him witnessing to the truth radiating hope. How could he do that? He wasn't alone.

He was so "filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7: 55) Of course, the amazing part of this story is there, condoning the execution is the one who will become the apostle of hope, was Paul.

You know of course that Saul/Paul dishes out all sorts of suffering while persecuting the early church and then when converted gets all that he dished out and more. He records just some of what he goes through. Five times he received forty lashes, three times he is beaten with rods, he was stoned once, shipwrecked three times, and spend a day adrift at sea. He faced many dangers of travel and was often hungry and thirsty, cold, and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:24-27). This after only two missionary trips.

Why didn't he give up? Hope, the abiding hope that he experienced with the Spirit of Truth living in him. He not only didn't give up, but Paul also came to boast of his sufferings because "...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..." and then he adds "...hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:5) Hope comes from the Spirit abiding in you. It's Jesus' promise. I won't

abandon you. You won't be orphaned. I'll ask God to give you the Spirit of Truth, "...he abides with you, and he will be in you."

Then why does it feel so bad? Why do we have anxiety and fear? Why does it cause us to groan with misery during this in-between time? Why? Because all creation is groaning. That's the image that Paul uses to help us to understand the natural sufferings of a broken world. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." (Romans 8: 22) That's what pandemics are. That's what earthquakes and famines and global warmings are. Creation groaning and it doesn't groan alone. "...but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.' (Romans 8:23) We groan. Nature groans. But get this. "The Spirit of God groans with us, intercedes with groans words cannot express. (Romans 8:26).

There is the answer to the question that keeps nagging at you. Where is God in all of this? Where? Groaning. We have a God who chooses to share in human suffering, weakness, and pain. It's Jesus' promise. I won't abandon you. I won't leave you. You won't be orphaned. I'll ask God to send the Spirit who will groan with you. When? During every hardship, through all the suffering of life, through pandemics, economic crisis, job losses, death, heart attacks, cancer, divorce, hungry, war. The Spirit is there, with you groaning, abiding, giving you hope. Whatever your list, the Spirit is there. And you have a list; we all have a list. ²

Paul had a list; in fact, he has two. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35, 38-39). Nothing will be able to separate us. I won't abandon you. I won't leave you. We won't be separated. The Spirit of Truth will abide in you and be with you.

This was the good news for the early Christians thinking back on what Jesus said and did. And this is good news for us today. Whatever your hardship, whatever the trial or tribulation, you are not alone, we aren't alone. Jesus promised it. Paul experienced it. I believe it. You can have it. We can share it. The world needs it.

Do not give up hope. Hope for tomorrow is what enables us to endure the problems of today. Hope for tomorrow is what allows the human being to make it through tough times. Abiding hope will get us through this time to the day which I know and believe is coming and it will be better.

So, wake-up with hope. Wash your hand for twenty seconds with hope. Suffer with hope. Work at home with hope. Wear your mask with hope. Weep with hope. Eat with hope. Fight cancer with hope. Exercise with hope. Keep sober with hope. Go to bed with hope. Live in-between with hope. Pray with hope. And if needed, groan with hope. Keep abiding in hope because Jesus promised he wouldn't leave us alone, and this promise means that nothing, absolutely nothing in all creation can separate us from his love.

¹ Ortberg, John. Beyond Optimism. April 29, 2020. Menlo.org.

² Ortberg.