

Easter 7—Year A
Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36
I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

These are some fabulous texts today! From the **Collect: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us. Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us.** Oh, that hits the spot.

And then from the **Acts to the Apostles**, we hear this: **When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, “Lord, is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”** (And we might add, “*Lord, is this the time when everything is going to reopen???*”) **He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** Jesus is saying, “*I know y’all want to know some definite timetables, but it’s not for you to know. All you need to know is that you will receive power from the Holy Spirit; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and New York and Boone, in all Judea, in all the places of privilege, and Samaria, in all the places where the poor and marginalized and outcast live; you will be my witnesses everywhere, to the ends of the earth.*”

The passage from Acts continues: **When he had said this, as they were watching, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”**

It is so easy to **keep our eyes focused somewhere else**—on the *normal we knew in early March before it all shut down*, on *some future hoped-for possibility*, on *some otherworldly reality*. And these **men in white robes** come saying, “*Dial it back in to the here-and-now. You just witnessed a whole lot of mystery as you watched your Lord ascend into heaven, but trust that he’s going to keep coming to you in ways that defy explanation. In the mystery of all mysteries, he’s going to keep on showing up and announcing his presence over and over again.*”

Right, we just **don’t get to know anything with certainty, but we will have all the power we need to keep meeting whatever comes.** We don’t need to look elsewhere; *Jesus will keep on showing up right where we are in our uncomfortable present.*

And *then*, we get **I Peter: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.** Like seriously? Is the author of **I Peter** reading our *email*, sitting in on our *zoom meetings*?

He continues: **But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.** Okay,

that's a bit much. **Rejoice, be glad, shout for joy in all this suffering? Consider yourself blessed** if you take some action that gets you **reviled** by others? I don't think **governors** are feeling themselves **blessed** right now when they are **reviled** for their **decisions**; I'm guessing that **store clerks** charged with **asking customers to abide by the rules** aren't feeling **blessed** when they get **yelled** at, or worse.

But there is a *larger point here*—whenever we step into **suffering**, we **share in Christ's suffering**. And when we **throw our arms open that wide**, there is a **peace** and a **joy** and a **glory that is revealed**. Much like the **Ascension**, it's a **mystery** how such **suffering** can reveal **glory** and **tap joy**, *but when you are standing in that arms-outstretched place of freedom, you know that this is true*.

I Peter continues: **Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.**

Wow! What a **call** and what a **promise**! **Humble yourselves, keep grounded, keep your feet firmly planted on the earth.** To be **under the mighty hand of God** could feel **imposing**, *but it could just as easily feel protective*, and in the next sentence, we find that **comfort** we're yearning for—**cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you**. Yes. We can breathe with that. But then we move to **call**.

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. It takes *discipline* to do all these hard things we are having to do—*wash our hands repeatedly, keep our distance* from one another, *wear a mask* that feels socially awkward and weird. **Keep alert to your body**, and **keep alert to those around you**. That takes a lot of *discipline*.

As **people of faith**, we have this **muscle**; it's just that sometimes we hit situations where we find *this muscle isn't as strong as we thought it was*. We are **finding that now**, and we need to have **compassion with ourselves and one another** as we **strengthen this muscle** and **norm ourselves to new ways of being**.

What comes *next* is a **significant caution**. **Your adversary the devil is prowling around looking for someone to devour. Don't we know it. Diabolos**, that sneaky **diabolical energy** that is always **prowling around seeking to divide us and throw us apart**. This is the **other virus** that is **consuming our country**. **I Peter** counsels us: **Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. Remember, you belong to a common humanity that is suffering all over the world. Don't let the devil divide you. Don't let the devil separate you from that suffering. Even as you self-isolate, don't isolate yourselves from that connection with all of humanity—to separate yourself from that connection is truly the road to hell.**

And *finally*, **I Peter** reminds us that **this won't last forever: And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.** Yes, **we are suffering**, and it's **going to go on for a little while**, and that **little while is going to be longer than any of us want**, but **God will restore us, support us, strengthen us, and establish us.** We may have just **had the rug pulled out from under us**, but **God will help us find firm ground again.** A **sure and certain future may elude us**, *but a sure and certain foundation will not.* We may feel like we're free-falling, *but God's got us in all the ways that matter.*

And so, we end where we began. We have every reason to believe that **our deepest prayer will be answered.** We will not be left comfortless, but the **Holy Spirit is on the way bringing us all the strength we need to move through these days with power and vitality, with grace and compassion, with steadfast commitment and fierce resilience, with a commitment to all of humanity and a willingness to find joy even in the midst of a pandemic.**

Touch this strength, and you won't need to keep looking up to heaven, *but your eyes will see heaven everywhere you look.* Amen.

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