

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A
Acts 8:5-8, 14-17
Ps 66 *passim*
1Pet 3:15-18
Jn 14:15-21

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Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Every Sunday since April 12, during this Easter season, we've been celebrating Jesus's passage from grace to glory, and we ponder the promise he made that we too, if we will follow in his footsteps, will pass from grace to glory.

This Easter Sunday and this Easter season have been different from any we've experienced before. Those of us who are privileged to minister at the altar and here in the sanctuary have been facing an empty set of pews. We look out and see nobody except the organist and the camera. Since Vatican II we know that the principal minister – the *principal* minister—of the Eucharistic liturgy is the people of God gathered in the assembly. You, *you*, are the principal minister. And you are cut off, worshiping from afar, and we thank God for your presence, even though, for the time being, it's a virtual presence.

Last Sunday and today, our Gospel readings have come from the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John. They form part of the long discourse that St. John places within the Last Supper. Yes, that's right: Holy Thursday, the evening before Jesus died. And yet the Church showcases them now, in the Easter season.

Jesus speaks words of comfort and reassurance and encouragement. "I will not leave you orphans." "I will send you another Advocate . . . , the [Holy] Spirit of truth." "I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you." And last week: "I am going to prepare a place for you," for "[i]n my Father's house there are many dwelling places." And finally, "[W]hoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

Plainly, Jesus uttered those words not so much to get his apostles ready for his death, but to prepare them for his ascension into heaven. We know that after Jesus's ascension the cynics and the naysayers must have taunted the apostles. Can't you just hear them? "Yeah, sure, you say that Jesus is the Christ and he is risen. So where is he? Let's see him." And St. Peter tells us, today, "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks for a reason for your hope, but do it gently and respectfully."

A reason for your hope. How many times in these past two months have I heard, "All we can do is hope and pray"? And it's true. But how do we pray in lockdown, how do we pray in a time of pandemic?

A few years ago a popular writer made a splash when she expressed the idea that prayer essentially boils down to three words: help, thanks, and wow. I've incorporated "Wow!" into my own prayer life. I can sit before the Blessed Sacrament for a long time, especially when it's exposed in that sunburst vessel called the monstrance, and sitting there all I need to pray is "Wow!" (with the exclamation point). Wow! In terms we Catholics are more comfortable with, it's a prayer of adoration. Along with adoration, we traditionally identify three other forms of prayer: petition (sometimes also called supplication), thanksgiving, and contrition.

But in this time of pandemic and lockdown, in addition to adoration and contrition and thanksgiving and supplication, I am reaching into the Church's closet and pulling out the prayer of lamentation. One of the books of the Bible is named Lamentations. Some of the psalms are lamentations. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These are words Jesus groaned on the Cross. They're the opening verse of Psalm 22. "How long, O Lord, how long. . . ?" That's Psalm 13. I was reading a novel awhile back in which a character, Melba by name, uttered this prayer: "How long, O Lord, how long doth thy servant have to put up with this . . . stuff?" (Melba actually used a stronger, more colorful, and more vulgar word than "stuff." That's ok when you're speaking privately to God.)

How long, O Lord, how long? We have a lot to lament. We lament all those who have died and are dying of COVID-19. We lament all those who are dying in isolation, cut off from their loved ones. We lament those who contract the coronavirus in service to their fellow human beings. We lament the exhaustion of health-care workers and first responders. And we also lament the indirect victims of this virus. We lament those who are dying of heart attacks and strokes because they are afraid to seek medical attention. While we rejoice over the lower number of traffic fatalities, we mourn those who are dying for want of donor organs. We lament those who have are losing their jobs and their businesses and their livelihoods. We lament the hopeless who are falling into despair and taking their own lives. We lament all those people, numerous but unnumbered, who will die when they are thrown into poverty.

In this time we remember also that this is the month of May, Mary's month. We remember that in that great prayer, *Hail, Holy Queen*, we speak of living our lives "weeping and mourning in this valley of tears." Lamentation. How long, O Lord, how long?

And then we also remember, "The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord." That's the flipside of lamentation. Lamentation is not just complaining to God; lamentation is also acknowledging our powerlessness, our total dependence on God's providence, our poverty. The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord!

As we try to explain the reason for our hope, to reaffirm our faith, we look to Jesus on the Cross and to Jesus's promise of life – life in abundance! – to those who keep and observe his commandments, who follow him not just with their lips but with their lives.

Yes, all we can do is hope and pray. We are in the loving arms of a merciful God. Jesus tells us, "I will not leave you orphans. I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you."

Let us hope. Let us not lose sight of the difference between hope and optimism. The optimist says, "It will all turn out OK." Sustained by the Spirit of truth and the virtue of hope, we say, "However it turns out, it will be OK. However it turns out, we will be OK." And in the meantime we pray, "How long, O Lord, how long?" while we remember that the Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.