

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
May 24, 2020; Ascension Day & 7th Sunday of Easter, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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." ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ 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."

SERMON *Please Hold Your Questions* Rev. Martin McGeachy

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That is the question. Not "to be or not to be?", but given that I be, I be here in this world right now, God, why have you forsaken me? It's a universal question. Why have you forsaken me, us, the ones I love, why have you abandoned us to evil and pain? Why do you allow this? Where are you? It's all the One question, spoken on our behalf by the One on the cross who suffered on our behalf. That is the question, and it is a Good question. A Good Friday question. And why is Good Friday, the day of all sadness and pain, called Good? Because it is

that pain which led to salvation, victory over sin and death. The Good question also leads us into faith and relief. It will lead to the Good Answer. But very likely not today.

You've seen reporters crowd around a celebrity trying to get them to answer questions about some hot topic. "LeBron, LeBron! Give us the scoop!" The Bible tells us that after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples many times with convincing proofs, and while no doubt at first they were stunned and frightened, by the end of forty days they must have been like a gaggle of paparazzi trying to get their eternal questions answered. "Jesus! Jesus! Tell us God's plans! What's the scoop? Tell me what's a'happening?" And Jesus, about to disappear up into the cloud, and not the cloud you can access from the Internet, says, "Sorry; that's above your pay grade. Please hold your questions until the end. The very End." And uuuup he goes. And they're standing there staring up, with even more questions, and a couple of angels have to shoo them away. "Move along, nothing to see here. You'll see him when you see him. Get to work discipling."

"But wait," they must have cried out, "When is this End time? That's one of the big Questions we have!" And even though Jesus just said, "**It is not for you to know,**" we still have questions. So did they. In 2 Peter 3, the writer says to the early church, Everybody wants to know when the End is coming. The scoffers ask why God is being so slow about it, if it's supposed to be so great and all. But in verses 8-9, he says, remember, "beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about the promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you," waiting for you to do what you need to do. So hang in there, keep the faith, and "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (v.18)

Sorry, gang, I know you have questions, but hold on to them. No answers today. Just a reminder of the promise that the Lord has it all in hand, and redemption will come. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." (Romans 8:28) As they say in the lovely movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, "Everything will be all right in the end. So if it is not all right, it is not yet the end."

But although we are enjoined to faith, and patience, and the remembrance of promise; and although we can every day make the choices to focus on the signs of resurrection and life—I've still got questions. How about you? Right now, I want to know why God is letting hundreds of thousands of people die from COVID-19, and I already had questions about the cancer, strokes, and the suffering of children, natural disasters that destroy lives, the existence, even the flourishing, of meanness, evil, heartlessness and stupidity.

On my day off last Monday, I had the time to be naughty on the Internet. I woke up with, gloriously, nothing I had to do, so I sat in bed with my laptop and I decided I should Google something stupid, just for fun. Maybe because my mother didn't like me to call things *Stupid*, and that's not easy when there's so much stupid in the world,

especially these days, it seems, I literally Googled “stupid” to see what happened, and I found some funny stuff. Most of it was just stupid, but a few things made me laugh, like the phrase that came up, “There are no stupid questions, only stupid people who have questions.”

Admit it. You cannot watch the news without thinking that. Come on, Jesus, it’s been two thousand years! We want answers! Except that it hasn’t been two thousand years; your questions have only been as long as you’ve been privileged to be alive. I’ve only got 60 years of questions. Approximately 22,000 days of questions. But according to 2 Peter, that could like 22 million years for God’s big picture, or maybe God’s not finished God’s morning coffee yet. It’s above my pay grade. Just remember that the plan is in motion, and the end is Good. Hold your questions till the end, please.

Ecclesiastes says, “God has set the right time for everything; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into our minds; we have a desire to know the future, but we cannot fully understand what God has done from the beginning to the end. Therefore there is nothing better for us than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live. Eat, drink, and be merry!” (3:11-14)

Sometimes that brings me comfort, but you know, while I’ve been doing a lot of eating and drinking in quarantine, it’s been hard to stay merry. It may seem like a hard commandment, just to hold your questions, trust and rejoice in your sorrow. But note what Jesus doesn’t say. He doesn’t say “Don’t have questions.” He says, “Hold on to them.” Maybe we’re meant not only to have them, ask them, but hold them--hold them close. Maybe it means live with them, work with them, use them. Maybe even treasure them. When that young girl Mary had given birth to the Son of God, and a multitude of angels appeared to some raggedy shepherds and sang glory to his birth, and those shepherds ran to tell her all about it, we know she had questions. Luke 2:19 tells us, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)

When Jesus was on the cross and cried out in anguish, “WHY?” Jesus didn’t just ask the question for us, he showed us who follow him and try to live like him that asking the question is what we can and should do. But if we’re going to follow his example, we have to acknowledge that no answer came to him on the cross. He died feeling abandoned, thirsting for relief. And that’s important. God didn’t save him from the cross, didn’t even whisper to him an answer to the question. But still, the Savior, our teacher, with the feeling of pain and abandonment, followed his unanswered question with, “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” He died, and was raised again, and ascended into heaven—and just as we are no longer abandoned to the dead because of his sacrifice; his words offer us the answer he didn’t get to his question. He answered it for us. The answer to the Good Question, “Why, O Lord, have you abandoned me,” is, and must be for our release from the pain of existential pondering, “Even though I don’t understand, even in my doubt, I commend myself to your hands.” And what follows is death and new life. That’s the Good Answer.

The great blessing in this lesson is that we need not have to wait for heaven to find relief. The ability to live with the question adds both peace and meaning to our journey through this world.

Mindfulness philosopher Parag Shah wrote in a blog a few years ago:

For a human mind not to have palatable answers is undesirable and frustrating. It continually attempts to look for instant answers, and ask questions to propagate itself. In a world of artificial intelligence, Google offers us all the answers right at our fingertips by pressing that home buttons. But I'm seeing that deeper intelligence lies in not how many answers we have but how many questions we can hold. Holding questions without trying to resolve them affords us the space and wisdom of not-knowing to operate on our intellect. It allows the inherently dualistic mind to see its own boundaries. What organically arises from holding the question long enough is the foundation of a non-dual state...

...for every answer we get, another question will invariably arise. But holding the question invites us to exhaust that endless Q&A cycle. It forces us to look at the field of the mind in which questions are arising. It give us space to see the unending game and quiets the mind so that we can see more clearly. As I try to gather my thoughts on holding questions, what I am left with is holding questions on my understanding of holding questions. :) (Parag Shah, <https://www.servicespace.org/blog/view.php?id=21894>)

In our other reading this morning, the prayer to the Ephesians is a blessing in belief, and a belief isn't all the answers, but a grounding in faith. And faith is the devotion to things unseen, questions often unanswered. Listen again: *"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,"* (not knowledge and facts, but wisdom in the unfolding of coming to know him) *"so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you."* (vss.17-18) – an enlightened heart, a feeling that "knows" what it is to hope. Hope isn't something we see, but a joyful reaching upward to an answer yet to come.

Allow yourself to feel bad when you feel bad. Allow yourself to get angry at God, and question why it's taking a thousand years for God to get around to taking care of things, while suffering us prevalent. God wants us to get mad about suffering and evil. And then, hold your questions. Allow them to rest in you; allow them to be—or not to be. And do what you can to make a difference for the suffering. God wants that, too.

Have faith; eat, drink, be merry, and question authority. (*point up*) The answers will be here any minute. Or a thousand years.

Amen.