*KEEP YOUR FORK*

1 Peter 1:3-9

May 3, 2020

A friend writes:

“Last year I hoped that the Orioles would make it to the World Series. They didn’t.

“I also hoped that my investments would do well enough to sustain dreams of early retirement. They didn’t.

“I occasionally hope that creative types will use their talents to produce the kind of art and music and television and movies that uplift our spirits and inspire us to try to be better than we are. Last I checked there is still a Lifetime network.

“When a 6-year old son of a friend lay in the hospital suffering from a malignant brain tumor, I hoped for a cure. He died.”

When you feel like the patron saint of lost causes, it is easy to ask whether God has abandoned us, or whether God is there at all.

This is precisely what was beginning to happen among the Christians Peter addresses in today’s passage. They were new Christians who were in danger of giving up their faith because of the hostility and persecution they faced. What could they do? What can we do?

Choice #1: We can abandon all hope.

Choice #2: We can pretend things aren’t that bad.

Choice #3: We can believe that God has it all in God’s hands even though I don’t know what in the world is going on.

Let’s take a closer look at these.

The first choice leads to bitterness or insanity. If we really took the enormous suffering of the world to heart, and saw no way out, no final justice or redemption, we’d either become embittered in our despair, or we’d crack under the strain, which suggests this is not a good choice.

The second option is a much more common choice than the first. Pretending things aren’t that bad shows up in either naïve optimism or willful attempts to remain blind to other people’s suffering. Some naively optimistic pretenders are optimistic for themselves, as they believe the bad stuff only happens to other people who somehow deserve it because of some supposedly bad choices they made earlier in their lives. These are very unpleasant people to be around when you’re suffering, and they don’t tend to do too well when suffering finally catches up to them, either. They get stuck on the question, “What did I do to deserve this?”

Other naively optimistic pretenders are optimistic for the whole extent of humanity, believing that we can create our own paradise on earth if we just work at it together. But even if this were possible – and every bit of evidence in the history of humanity says it isn’t – this future paradise wouldn’t undo all of the pain and suffering and crushed hope of the past.

On the other hand, blind pretenders simply try to ignore pain as much as possible, usually by running away- making a break for it, an escape attempt—from suffering. White flight from the inner city to the suburbs; lying in the sun in Cancun; getting hammered on booze; dulling the pain with opiate prescriptions.

The third choice – that God has control of whatever becomes of all this -- that is Peter’s choice. In this letter written to despairing Christians 2,000 years ago, he reminds them that their real hope lies in resurrection, that no matter what happens in this life, Christ has won for them an inheritance in heaven that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

Yet Peter’s choice is burdened with its own problems. These days, when Christians answer crushed hopes with talk of heaven, they’re often accused of rationalizing inaction, of being pie-in-the-sky idealists, escapists who can’t deal with reality. Christians with hope hear things like, “That’s all well and good, but it doesn’t really put food on the table, or pay the rent, or cure my cancer, does it?” Modern Christians are supposed to be activists, not escapists.

Did Peter’s own resurrection hope lead him to be an activist or an escapist? The snapshot we have of Peter prior to Christ’s resurrection is of a fearful man who essentially ran away – the consummate escapist. Remember that Peter was the brash apostle who swore he’d never betray Jesus, and then denied him three times before the rooster crowed that morning. After the Resurrection, we see one of the early Church’s great leaders, one might even say an activist, a man who faced his own martyrdom with the guts to ask to be crucified upside down because he wasn’t worth do die the same way Christ died.

The fact that Peter probably wrote today’s passage shortly before his martyrdom suggests that it is not only his response to despairing Christians, but a confession of his own ultimate hope at a time when the Roman state was crushing his worldly hopes. Resurrection hope turned this escapist into an activist, a gatherer of the Church, and a martyr, a man who sought no escape. In fact, much of the rest of I Peter contains his instructions on how to act as believers. Peter doesn’t seem to find any inconsistency between resurrection hope and Christian action in this world.

But that’s not all. You and I can embrace suffering as Christ did on the cross because we know that the cross is not the end of the matter. There’s something better coming.

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer, and had been given three months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die, so she contacted her pastor and had her come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told her which songs she wanted sung at the service, what Scriptures she would like read and what she wanted to be wearing. The woman also told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order, and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. “There’s one more thing,”  
 she said excitedly.

“What’s that?” came the pastor’s reply.

“This is very important,” the woman continued. “I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand.” The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

The woman explained. “In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say, ‘You can keep your fork.’ It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork, I knew that something great was about to be given to me. It wasn’t Jell-O or pudding. It was cake or pie. Something with substance. So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, “What’s with the fork?” Then I want you to tell them: ‘Something better is coming, so keep your fork, too.’

The pastor’s eyes were filled with tears as she hugged the woman goodbye. She knew this would be one of the last times she would see her before her death. But she also knew that that woman had a better grasp of heaven than she herself did. The woman knew that something better was coming.

At the funeral, people were passing by the woman’s casket, and they saw the pretty dress she was wearing, and her favorite Bible, and the fork placed in her right hand. Over and over, the pastor heard the question, “What’s with the fork?” And over and over, she smiled. During her message, the pastor told the people of the conversation she had with the woman shortly before she died. She also told them about the fork and about what it symbolized to her. The pastor told the people how she could not stop thinking about the fork, and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it, either. She was right.

So, the next time you reach down for your fork, let it remind you that there is something better coming.

See, this season of Easter is a special time for Christians to celebrate the ultimate reason for our hope: Christ is risen, and invites you and me to rise with Him to new life. That’s no invitation to leave the table; it’s a suggestion to keep our forks.

(I’m going to lead us in a litany, each line of which finishes with us all saying together, “Keep your forks.” Say it aloud; say it to yourself; say it under your breath. But it really goes better if you affirm that aloud: “Keep your forks.”)

Easter is an invitation to try again with God’s help to break that addiction we had given up all hope of ever breaking. There’s something better coming; “Keep your forks.”

Easter is a chance to work at renewing the marriage we had given up all hope of ever saving. There’s something better coming; “Keep our forks.”

Easter is an opportunity to reach out to our neighbors who in our busyness, we neglect. There’s something better coming; “Keep your forks.”

Easter is an invitation to look at our lack of love and seek God for compassion. There’s something better coming; “Keep your forks.”

Easter is a chance to “renew our strength and mount up with wings as eagles, to run and not faint.” There’s something better coming; “Keep your forks.”

Maybe there’ll even be baseball this year.

Amen.