

Sunday, May 17, 2020 – Sixth Sunday of Easter
“An Inspiring View”

1 Peter 3: 13-22

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Adapted from CPR

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Alex Honnold is known for free-soloing. You can easily find a picture of him climbing a rugged cliff, suspended high above the ground. What is interesting about these pictures is the tension between the struggle of the rock climber and inspiration of the setting. Looking at the rock climber, we see Alex, with only his hands and his feet holding him to the stone. His body leans into the rock, his hands are lodged in a crevice, and his face is close to the stone. Looking at the setting, however, we see what inspired him to do this. The vast expanse of rock jutting up into the sky. The beautiful expanse of clouds above him. The deep and varied landscape below him. In one picture, we see the tension of free-soloing. Alex’s vision is limited. His struggle is intense. But the world is much larger than his limited experience. He is part of a beautiful creation that evokes awe in those who see.

While Alex Honnold is not a Christian, his experience is similar to that of Christians. Discipleship is difficult. Its struggle is intense. We find ourselves drawn into the difficulty of discipleship, with our face pressed against the wall, and we need one small glimpse of that larger vision, that inspiring view that carries us on.

In our text this morning, Peter writes a letter to the churches and offers them an inspiring view. Peter is writing to churches in various cultural settings: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1). While these are different churches in different cultures, one thing is common among them. They are all struggling. They are all having difficulty with discipleship. As Christians, they struggle with how faith interacts with the world. And Peter’s letter offers them an inspiring view. He offers a larger vision of God’s glorious work in Christ that helps them endure. We will meditate on Peter’s words this morning with the goal that confidence in Christ will encourage us to endure the difficulty of discipleship.

Christians can sometimes interpret suffering in their life as if something were wrong. Bill and Janel were having trouble with their friends. They had been part of a group of couples for years. Their children had been in scouting together; they had watched their kids play in soccer

games and baseball games, basketball and volleyball; they had celebrated graduations from high school and college, weddings, and the birth of grandchildren. Now, however, with all those years behind them, it seemed like things had changed. Everything was becoming political.

Events reported on the news became sources of argument. Bill and Janel tried to articulate how they as Christians would react, but their faith was putting a strain on their friendships. Bill and Janel were wondering if they should just keep their faith to themselves. “I must be doing something wrong,” Bill once said. “Having friends that you can be honest with should not be this hard.”

But it was, and it is. When our Lord called us to follow him, he called us to take up our cross. Discipleship is not easy. Not now. Not ever. Satan would tempt us to believe that we are doing something wrong, to believe that the Christian life should be easy and, if it is not, to believe that we should just be quiet about our faith. Peter, however, offers us a different vision. Peter encourages us to “always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15). Why? Because we know the power of God that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Peter offers us a way of dealing with the difficulties of discipleship. Peter encourages us to look to Christ. When we think about the disciple Peter, we often think of what he did. We remember how Peter wanted to walk on water, how he wanted to build booths on the Mount of Transfiguration, how he claimed he would follow Jesus unto death, how he denied Jesus in the courtyard, how he preached of Jesus on Pentecost. Peter’s life is rich and varied, and we might think that Peter could give us some advice from his life of discipleship.

Yet, Peter does not ask us to consider what he did as a disciple. Instead, he asks us to consider what he saw. At the end of his letter, Peter writes, “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ” (5:1). Peter wants to be remembered not for what he said and did but for what he was: a witness of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. As a witness of the sufferings of Christ, Peter has seen something. Something that he wants to share with Christians.

Peter has seen how God enters into suffering and triumphs over it. God is able to use suffering in his kingdom. Suffering is not something insurmountable for God. As Peter writes to

Christians who are suffering in their discipleship, Peter reminds them that God works salvation through suffering. He says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (3:18). Through Christ's sufferings, sinners were brought to God. Without the sufferings of Christ, we would remain in our sins, separated from God by what we say, think, and do. But because of the sufferings of Christ, because of his death upon the cross, the wrath of God is appeased. The Righteous One has died for the unrighteous that we might be members of the kingdom of God.

Christ Jesus took on suffering. He struggled with the power of sin, death, and the devil. He died that we might be saved, and he rose from the dead that we might know that nothing can separate us from the love of God and nothing can overcome God's work in the world. Jesus Christ is able to enter into suffering and work through it to bring about the reign and rule of God. Although our situations of discipleship may be difficult, especially now, we can endure them with confidence in the working of God. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is able to enter into suffering and use it for his purposes. We therefore need not fear or flee from situations of difficulty but rather follow our Savior, confident in his power.

Albrecht Altdorfer was an engraver and painter working in Germany around the time of the Reformation. Altdorfer was known for his ability to juxtapose biblical scenes with vivid landscapes. In his work, you will see Jesus and his disciples in moments of suffering, and around them, there is a much larger landscape of vivid colors, capturing the tension of Christian living. Suffering for the faith always occurs within a much larger vision of God's work in the world.

In one painting, Altdorfer depicts Jesus praying in Gethsemane. In the painting, you see the disciples in the foreground. Peter, James, and John are asleep. Peter rests on a rock, with his back to the scene. John is asleep on his back. James is looking downward. Behind them, in the center of the painting, is Jesus. He is kneeling before the face of a cliff and an angel is bringing him the cup of suffering he will drink. Finally, much further in the distance, behind Jesus, we see a delegation. They come out of a background lit with the fires of hell. Led by Judas, we see the religious leaders and the temple guard about to come and seize Jesus.

What is amazing about this painting is the way the arrangement of the figures teaches a

lesson. The disciples are obviously defenseless, having fallen asleep. John is actually lying on his back, facing those who are coming to arrest Jesus, his entire body left wide open to attack. And yet, kneeling between the disciples and the forces of darkness is Jesus. His prayer is their defense; his willingness to bear the cup of God's wrath is their salvation; his weakness and willingness to bear the wrath of God are the power of God that protects his people.

Because Jesus stands between the disciples and the forces of darkness, nothing will be able to come to them that has not come through Jesus. Jesus is the Victor, having triumphed over all evil in his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. All suffering that comes to us has already been conquered by him.

In his letter and in our text, Peter gives us a glimpse of this glory of God. He relates to the churches how Jesus not only suffered for their sin but how he rose from the dead in victory over all evil. He descended into hell to proclaim his victory over the powers of hell, and he ascended into heaven, is seated on the right hand of God, where he now rules over all things.

This is our larger landscape. This is our larger vision. When suffering enters our lives, when difficulties endanger our discipleship, Peter encourages us to see this larger vision of our risen and ruling Lord. God calls us to see our lives in light of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Consider Lisa. Her Facebook and Twitter feeds are filled with all the usual pandemic pandemonium, including Christians and non-Christians alike of various opinions on pandemic policy excoriating their neighbors, their government, even each other. She has firm convictions herself and yet she chooses to engage in a respectful manner. She asks sincere questions. She works to understand the hopes, the needs and the fears of those who think differently than her. She prays fervently for God's help to bite her tongue when her emotions get stoked too hot. And because of her stance of care and love for all, she's taking flack from people on both sides for trying to ride that tension.

She remembers what it was like at confirmation. Her pastor had her prepare a faith statement to read before the congregation. She was so nervous back then. Now, however, that seems so simple—talking to other Christians about what you believe. That's nothing compared to exercising your faith publicly in the midst of the fear of a pandemic. Little did she know how

important that lesson in confirmation would become to her. Faced with the difficulty of discipleship in a pandemic, she found confidence in Christ. She struggled to put her faith into word and action, trusting in the one who suffered and rose and even now rules over all things for her. Amen.