

“When You Can’t Hold On....”

I Peter 4:12-14 and 5:6-11; Acts 1:1-11

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The story is told of a young man who was a bit deceitful. Whenever he was on the verge of trouble he had a ready answer. When asked about the empty cookie jar he said “Sis took the last one” which she did after he’d eaten all the others. To his parent’s annoyance about his messy room he replied “But I was so busy studying.” And those weekly chores that were still undone? “I was helping at church.”

One day this young man was out hiking along a high cliff. Suddenly, soft soil gave way; he fell; grabbed the branch of a scraggly tree and held on, hanging hundreds of feet in the air. Desperate, he cried out, “God, help me!” Nothing. “Oh, God, in the name of St. Francis, help me!” Suddenly boomed a voice, “I will help you if you will change your ways: from deceit to truth.” “Oh, God, in the name of St. Francis I will change. Help me!” “I will, but you must answer one question.” “Yes, in the name of St. Francis, anything!” screamed the youth. Came the reply “Is it St. Francis of Assisi or St. Francis Xavier?”

Holding on against adversity is a challenge we all face, even if it’s not hanging off a life-threatening cliff. Things can change in a moment. In the reading from Acts we can imagine the disciples’ excitement. Jesus, their teacher and companion, is now Lord of Life, in charge and victorious over death. The disciples ask him “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” After all, he had taught them to pray “Thy kingdom come.”

But what a surprise! Jesus says “Wait!” God sets the timetable, not you. “Wait and I will give you power to be my witnesses.” When you can’t hold on, hold on.

Easier said than done. Sometimes, no matter how much you want to, you can’t hold on. A couple of our confirmands struggled with a piece or two of memory work. They had it until they came to recite it to

me. Then it was gone, like a helium balloon escaped from your hand. Life is like that: it's on the hook and then swimming away; or it's on your tray until it and you are on the floor. Not just lunch but finances, health, loved ones, relationships, employment...even life itself.

“Things could be worse” we sometimes say. Not always comforting but often true. Think Confirmation was hard? Imagine everyone in town calls you by an ethnic slur and treats you like an idiot. You are not guaranteed protection under the law. Rocks are thrown at your house, you get chased home from school and you get blamed for all the trouble in town. That's worse, and that's about what the 2nd century church experienced and to which today's letter from I Peter was written.

Even tougher, those believers were surprised. After all, wasn't their Savior the guy in charge? Where were the answers?

We sometimes want easy answers. But, really, there are things we just know God wouldn't say. After all, there are things we know our parents wouldn't say, right? Things like:

- Just leave all the lights on: it makes the house look more cheery.
- Yeah, I used to skip school a lot, too.
- Let me smell that shirt—yeah, it's good for another week.
- Your curfew is just a general time; hey, I'm not running a prison.
- I don't have a tissue with me—just use your sleeve.
- If Timmy's parent says it's okay, that's good enough for me.

Well, there are things God just wouldn't say. One of them is to promise us we will never suffer. In fact, if we take this commitment to Christ seriously, there will be times when we are reviled for our faith. The risk the church faced then, and the challenge to believers today, is to give up. To move on and make somebody or something else the Lord of their lives. In response, the scripture speaks clearly “Don't be surprised.” (I Peter 4:12)

In fact, this passage from I Peter is filled with memorable scripture, as though a parent and a sports coach sat at a table and wrote it

together: “Be disciplined,” wrote your coach. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” wrote your parent. “Be steadfast,” wrote your coach. “You are blessed,” wrote your parent.

They’re both right, of course, having lived through uncertain times themselves and knowing what difficulty looks like. And your parent knows Jesus and your coach might, too: Jesus, who suffered also. The reading from Acts makes it clear: “After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs...and speaking about the Kingdom of God.” Hear that? *After his suffering*. The path to the Kingdom of God leads through some suffering and trials. When you can’t hold on, hold on.

Unlike the young man hanging on the scraggly bush at the edge of the cliff, faith is not just “God and me.” There is a very specific reason that baptism—which is the foundation of Confirmation—and Confirmation itself happens in morning worship and not as a private ceremony. The reason is that faith is experienced, renewed and lived in community. It is in Christian community that we support one another in the holding on, both in sharing our faith and encouraging one another when times are tough. It is why sponsors and Sunday School teachers and MYF advisors—to name just a few—are partners with your parents in the journey of faith. When you can’t hold on, they help you hold on.

Courage is fear that holds on a minute longer. “Wait,” Jesus said, “until you are clothed with power from on high.” That power is from the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ who has ascended to God and given us the gift of the Holy Spirit to sustain us through one another and in this community of followers in his name. Welcome, welcome to this even deeper commitment to love and service as disciples of Jesus. Amen.