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Evangelism can be a big, scary word. The thought of evangelism can make many of us feel nervous. Many probably even have a picture in their head of what it means to do evangelism. Some of you maybe think of the Jehovah's witnesses going door-to-door or maybe you think of missionaries traveling to distant countries. When I was in college at UNC we frequently had missionary-evangelist types on campus who would stop you on your way to and from class to ask about your faith journey. Or there are the big-time evangelists like Billy Graham who would pack stadiums full of people to talk about Jesus.

While these are all pictures of what evangelism might look like—they do not offer a complete or in some cases a very appealing picture of evangelism. I think our text from 1 Peter is actually much more helpful. "Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have in Christ." I find this passage helpful because 1 Peter doesn't say "always be ready to give a detailed and specific theological argument and treatise on who Jesus is." 1 Peter is not demanding that each of us go through rigorous seminary training so that we have all the answers—not that those of us who have been to seminary have all the answers anyway. Instead it says be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have. In other words, be ready to tell people where God is active in your life, where do you see the Holy Spirit at work, or how is God changing you and your life and giving you hope.

These verses about always being ready to give an answer must be taken in light of everything else that surrounds it. These words about being ready to give an answer for the hope that you have are not written to people experiencing immeasurable blessing. It is easy to give an answer of hope when everything is going our way—when our family is healthy and happy, when we are succeeding at work, and when we aren't worried about bills or our own physical health. But 1 Peter does not say be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have when everything goes your way—instead 1 Peter says be ready to give an answer in the midst of suffering, even unjust suffering! What a remarkable command.

There is actually quite a bit of talk about "hope" going around these days. We say things to friends and family like "I hope you're feeling well and staying healthy." We "hope" that the government's policies will keep us healthy and safe. We "hope" that the economy will recover quickly. We "hope" that this virus will be over soon. And I've heard from many of you that we have all been "hoping" to return to church soon. Now there is nothing wrong with wishing for or desiring a particular outcome. It's perfectly natural in a time like this. But as Christians we have a different type of hope than the rest of the world. Those around us may anchor their hopes in particular outcomes, but our hope is anchored in something much more foundational and stable.

And like any good Children's Sermon the answer here is Jesus. Jesus is the one that anchors our hope because in Jesus, God came near to us in the midst of our brokenness, sinfulness, and death. God did not turn away from our suffering and pain but instead came and lived in the midst of

such brokenness. No matter what we face we have hope because we know that our God can relate to us in the midst of our suffering; we know that we never walk through suffering alone. What is more, is that through the cross God has acted decisively against sin and death. Sin and death do not get the last word. Instead, God promises to redeem, restore, and reconcile all things.

This is what we hope in—God’s work and action in our world, regardless of our individual circumstances. These promises have dramatic implications for how we live our lives, how we face suffering, and even how we endure grief, loss, and a global pandemic. Our emotions are not permanently tied to the reports we hear on the news or ever changing dates for reopening. Our hopes and dreams do not rest solely on how quickly we can go back to spending time with friends or even attending church. Yes, we may feel the sting of loss and grief, but we can rest on God’s promised resurrection and God’s promise of presence even when external circumstances are chaotic and worrisome. This doesn’t mean that we won’t ever feel afraid, and we will still need to take time to grieve. The difference is that our entire reality and all of our hope is not bound up in the suffering we face or what happens next with this pandemic. In this midst of our fears, grief, and anxiety we have a place to turn too.

And 1 Peter suggests that when we turn to God in prayer because we are afraid, or when we reach out in hope to serve our neighbor because we are clinging to promises of God in the midst of our uncertainty, that people around us might notice something different. Our response to grief, loss, and suffering is different than the rest of the world. So different, that people might begin to ask questions. Why in the midst of our own fear and grief do we still seek to serve others? During a time when many are operating from a scarcity and hoarding mindset why are we living generously? And when those questions come, 1 Peter urges us to be ready.

I think this is some of the most powerful evangelism—when people ask why our lives look different and we are able to point to Jesus. It is powerful because we are responding to a question they are asking. Evangelism can be difficult, especially these days when many people feel like Christians are pushy or forcing their beliefs. But when someone asks you a question, they have already made clear that they want to listen and engage.

This is powerful evangelism because having hope in the midst of crisis, grief, and anxiety matters to people. Having hope that is not tied to our external circumstances is a unique and powerful thing. One of my seminary professors has written a book called *Walking Through Twilight* in that book he unpacks watching his brilliant and accomplished wife’s decline and eventual death from dementia at a very young age. While the loss is heartbreaking, this professor also notes that as Christians how we suffer, how we grieve, how we endure loss and anxiety is one of the greatest gifts we have to offer the world. The promise of God with us, God for us, God reconciling and redeeming in the midst of death, grief, and even a pandemic are words and promises of hope that our world desperately needs to hear right now. Let’s go tell them.

Amen.