



COMMUNITY  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

MINISTER  
DAN YEAZEL, PREACHING  
KIM JOHNSON

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Sixth Sunday in Lent

*1 Peter 3:13-22*

### Accounting for Hope

When Adam and Sarah were younger we had a routine at the dinner table that was a lot fun. Monica and I would ask “who are you?” This was to help them be prepared if they should ever get lost and would need to know what to say. Who are you? I am Sarah Eileen Yeazel. S-a-r-a-h. I live at .... And so on.

Who are you? Is a question asked of us countless times in our lives. It is a question that follows us regardless of age, gender, or economic status. It is a question that requires us to identify ourselves, it is a question that demands an answer whenever we start school, or move into a new class, when we move to a new community, when we make new friends. It is asked when we apply for a job, or when we join a church. It is asked when we get into trouble, when we do something well, or when we are noticed by somebody else. Who are you?

It is a question we ask of others as well. A question that is curious, sometimes indignant (especially if it is a person trying

to sell you something. Who are you!)? It is a question we may ask of ourselves in times of change and transition, or loss when our whole sense of self is in danger. We look at ourselves and say who are you?

The writer of 1 Peter does not ask the question in so many words. But clearly he wants his readers to be able to answer it. He knows the gentile Christians face the serious testing of persecution by the Roman authorities. Neighbor could report neighbor for being a Christian and that person would be brought in a questioned. Who are you? They would be asked. Are you a Christian? If yes, they face any kind of punishment and suffering that the Romans wanted to inflict. Including being put to death.

Six years ago, one of the teenagers shot at Columbine high school was asked by her killer “do you believe in God? And she said yes just before he pulled the trigger. And while the killings were not motivated by religious hatred, can you imagine the

strength it took for her to affirm her faith right then, knowing that might just be the thing to cause him to shoot. She said yes.

Who are you? The author reminds them of the obvious. You are Christians. Followers of Jesus Christ, people who live after Christ example. You can show others who you are, by doing good. For it is better he says to suffer for doing good if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.

The first century tabloids must have had a field day. What do you mean doing good and not evil? Are you crazy? The Romans are out to kill you? Don’t you understand that the best defense is a good offense? Why not make a preemptive strike? Get them before they get you? Maybe you can’t win but you can certainly put up a good fight!

Conventional wisdom said the same kinds of things about Jesus. He should have put up a fight people were saying. Christ also suffered for sins once and for all, for the righteous and the unrighteous in order to bring us all to God. Who are you? We are people for whom Jesus died.

The new life made possible by the resurrection is part of what Peter is calling people to. He wants us to hold fast to our identity as followers of Jesus, but he has a curious addition, a challenging statement about hope. Who are you? You are people of God saved by Jesus Christ. And you are people of hope, be able to give an account for your hope, he writes. Be prepared to tell others about why you can see a world of suffering and still not give

into despair or denial of faith. This is where he gets more specific. Be able to account for your hope, and do so in a gentle and reverent manner.

Now there is a challenge and a half. Be ready to account for your hope. With all the crazy stuff going on in the world and in our lives perhaps, many might say why hold on to hope at all? How can we be hopeful people and have our eyes open? Some might ask this of the church, “if Monday to Saturday there are all kinds of terrible things going on in the world our there, how can one preach or sing about our joyous future on Sunday?” Some might ask, “don’t you get it, don’t you see what is going on out here in the real world?”

As Christians we do get it, we do see what is going on in the real world, we acknowledge and endure suffering as Christ did on the cross because we know that the cross is the not the end of the matter. There is something better coming.

This spirit of always being hopeful is captured beautifully in a story about a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer, and had been given three months to live. You may have heard this before but see if can’t stir you again. This woman’s doctor told her to start making preparations to die, so she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told him 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.

"That shocks you, doesn't it?" the woman asked. "Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

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 he hugged the woman goodbye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he

also knew that that woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She knew that something better was coming.

At the funeral, people were walking 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, he smiled. During his message, the pastor told the people of the conversation he had with the woman shortly before she died. He also told them about the fork and about what it symbolized to her. The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork, and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it, either. He was right.

Who are we? We are people of hope, living examples of a community faithfully seeking God, knowing that questions and suffering come and will come, but that through it all, God is the source of our hope.

Today we are invited to return again to the table that Jesus sets before us. Here, we are welcome. Here we are asked to consider who we are, to be thankful for whose we are and feed with the promise and the hope of God's unending love for us. If we were ever lost, if we are ever tempted to abandon hope, here is a sign for us. Draw near. Believe that the best is yet to come. Amen.