

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 19, 2020 (Proper 11A)**

This morning, I want to bring you briefly back to a time that, although it wasn't long ago chronologically speaking, really does feel like a lifetime ago. I'm talking about the early days of this pandemic. March according to the calendar. A mere four months ago, but eons emotionally and spiritually.

You may recall that when things got shut down, we had about four weeks to go until Easter. And those last weeks of Lent felt particularly...Lenten. As someone put it, it was the "Lentiest Lent ever." And as the reality of not being able to see friends and family members sunk in, we were all learning about masks and trying to figure out Zoom and discovering new lingo like "flattening the curve" and "the new normal" and "Fauci." Going to the grocery store felt like heading into battle and parents were yanking out more and more of their hair with each passing day.

I distinctly remember speaking to someone, on Zoom, the week after Easter and she told me just how much Easter had meant to her this year. How those first few weeks of quarantine were scary and dark and unsettling but that she held out hope because she was able to focus on the coming of Easter. That it was something to look forward to. It was different, for sure. Watching the service online, no Easter egg hunts for her children, not spending the day with friends and relatives.

But as we continued our conversation, it took a turn. Here we were in the immediate aftermath of Easter, with the house still stocked with jelly beans and chocolate bunnies, the sugar high still going strong, when reality came crashing down. Easter Day had come and gone and yet the uncertainty of the pandemic was still there. Everyone was still working from home. Everything was still shut down. Kids were still struggling to adjust to online school. And she told me, "I was so excited for Easter, but now there's nothing to look forward to. It just feels like there's no hope."

I know we've all had similar thoughts these past months. If we're lucky they've been fleeting, and calling a friend or venting with a family member helps. Nothing has prepared any of us for the social isolation and the uncertainty and the very real grief that accompanies the loss of routine and the ability to celebrate life's joys and mark life's sorrows with friends and loved ones.

And so, while there are moments when we, too, feel like there's no hope, at one level trafficking in hope is all we do these days. I hope school opens. I hope I can get back to church. I hope I can see my grandchildren. I hope I can go to the theater. I hope things just get back to normal soon. But sometimes when we talk about hope, it borders on wishful thinking. That's just how we use the word. We toss hope around as if it's something emanating from *us*. We center it around our own needs and wishes and desires. And so we hope baseball returns this year. We hope we're able to get a new car. We hope we can eat out at our favorite restaurant in the North End.

Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, writes about what hope really is. It transcends wishful thinking and earthly desires. He speaks of it as the "eager longing" to experience freedom in Jesus Christ. There's a confidence in this "eager longing" that God's plan for all of humanity, that God's plan for *you*, will lead to all joy and hope in believing. That's faith. And so hope and faith are inextricably linked, one with the other. You can't be faithful without experiencing hope. And you can't be hopeful without experiencing faith.

But here's the thing. Hope doesn't ignore suffering. If it did, it would be merely false hope. Or, worse yet, escapism. Which is why even in the midst of a pandemic, there is hope. Even in the midst of the trials and tribulations of this life, there is hope. Even when our friends of color are crying out in pain, there is hope. Even when loved ones are sick or dying, there is hope. Even when life itself feels hopeless, there is hope. Through faith, there is literally no situation you can encounter that is devoid of hope. The light of Christ burns brightly even in the most dire situations.

Yesterday, we learned that we had lost one of our true national treasures in John Lewis. The Civil Rights leader, revered for his moral clarity and deep faith, was known — for good reason — as the Conscience of Congress. And if there was ever someone who embodied hope in the midst of struggle, it was John Lewis. The son of Alabama sharecroppers, he was brutally beaten by police in Selma in 1965 on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and was arrested more than 40 times demonstrating against racial and social injustice. Lewis was driven by a deep faith and a passionate desire to respect the dignity of every human being. His was a stubborn and deeply rooted faith, a faith borne of hope.

Frankly, this entire sermon could have just been a string of John Lewis quotes. But I'll share just one. A quote that speaks to this man's infinite hope. "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Do not become bitter or hostile. Be hopeful... We will find a way to make a way out of no way."

The life of John Lewis serves as the perfect reminder that the deep abiding hope that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, isn't beholden to whim or circumstance. Hope is the rock in the midst of the storm. And that, my friends, is good news. That's why we gather for worship and place Jesus at the center of our lives.

And it's why the hope of Easter is not just a single day but a way of life. A reminder that even when things are broken, God's wholeness heals. A reminder that even when things are in disarray, God's presence brings order. A reminder that even when it feels like there's nothing to look forward to, God's love brings hope.

I invite you to bring some of the "eager longing" of hope into your own spiritual life. Not as some future desire or far off wish. But right now. Pray for a spirit of eager longing. We need hope more than ever right now. The *world* needs hope more than ever right now.

John Lewis often called his prayer time having "an executive session with myself" — I love that phrase. And he would just sit and listen for God's voice; waiting for God to tell him: "This is what you must do. This is what you must say. Do what you can, and play the role that you can play." Words to live by as all seek to bring that sense of "eager longing" into our souls, and to play the role that we can play.