

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” For as much as the world has changed, in so many ways it has stayed exactly the same. For as long as there have been people around, for as long as there have been things like communities and families and just life in general, there have always been those who seek to proclaim that hope is, well, hopeless. Those that would tell you that hope is pointless, that it has no place, that it’s a byproduct of misguided optimism, a characteristic of those who choose to view the world through rose-colored glasses, who refuse to see reality for what it is. Those that would say that if you live your life through the lens of hope, you’re a fool who can’t see the world for what it is, a dark, dreary place that will only seek to beat you down and wear you out until you’re just ready to give up. Those who would ask why do you have hope when everything that surrounds you gives you reasons for why hope should be the last thing on your radar. Those who would tell you that if you dare to hope you’re simply setting yourself up for disaster, because why pin your hopes on something that you have absolutely no ability to prove will happen? Why give your heart away to something that may just leave you disappointed? Why let yourself hope when you may end up just being plain old wrong?

Why let yourself hope? It's a question the brand new, baby Christians of 1 Peter probably asked themselves over and over again as they read this letter. Why in the world should they always be ready to give an accounting of the hope that is in them when sometimes hope felt like the most far away thing they could fathom. Why let themselves hope, this new community of believers who have never seen Jesus, never experienced the disciples, never have had the joy of a tangible experience with their faith? How can they keep going when they're building themselves up purely on hope; purely on the trust that the gospel that they've been told is legitimately true and something they can cling to? The world around them, they themselves probably wrestle with the question of, why put your hope on something you have no proof of? Why let yourself hope and long for something that might just be a fairy tale? Why open yourselves up for that much of a letdown?

Why let themselves hope when they're also being intensely persecuted for this new faith that they don't even understand yet? Why let yourself hope when their community isn't even being allowed to grow in peace and solitude, allowed to figure things out slowly but surely? Why let themselves hope when they are being battered and torn about by the world around them that wants nothing to do with the faith that they proclaim? Why let themselves keep clinging to this still as yet flimsy, tentative faith

when things are already proving to be so unbelievably hard? Who can give an accounting for the hope that is in them when the world around them constantly and consistently keeps giving them a million reasons for why hope is just plain old...pointless?

Maybe that sounds, feels familiar...how dare we be people of hope in the midst of a world gone mad? How can we possibly have a viable accounting for the hope that is in us readily available on the tips of our tongue when day in and day out it feels like the world is bound and determined to show us why hope is foolish, why there's nothing left to hope for, why hope is a fool's errand that ignores facts and figures and reason? How can we proclaim anything about the hope that is in us when some days it feels like hope has entirely abandoned us? How can we talk about hope when there are voices in the world shouting the top of their lungs from one extreme to the other? When there are voices proclaiming that God caused this to prove a point, that only Jesus is going to fix the 'Rona and so prayer, not face masks or science is all that will work, that this is proof that the world is unknowable and chaotic and how can you have faith in a God that would let something like this happen so it must be proof that God doesn't exist. How...how do we give an accounting for hope in a world dictated by

Facebook rants, contradicting news cycles, and just a general dang sense that maybe all is lost and hopelessness is our best bet?

On my worst days, I want to give into that mentality, to chuck it all in and say maybe hope isn't worth it. On my best days, I cling to hope like it's the last drop of water in the ocean. And on the days inbetween, I think of this quote from a book I just finished, "Every story has four parts: the beginning, the middle, the almost-ending, and the true ending. Most people give up at the part of the story where things are the worst, when the situation feels hopeless, but that is where hope is needed most. Only those who persevere can find their true ending." Here we are in the midst of the almost-ending, when things might feel hopeless, and that people of God is when we need hope most, and so the writer of 1 Peter says we need to have an accounting for our hope ready, so here it is: a defense of hope, as seen through the eyes of all of you who answered my question on Facebook of what gives you hope.

A defense of hope in sunshine and warm days, which warm our skin and our hearts with the reminder that not all is bleak, not all is cold.

A defense of hope in rainbows, which remind us sometimes of our loved one's continued presence with us, of God's promise to always walk

with us, of the fact that a rainbow is only possible after you've come through the storm.

A defense of hope in springtime and birds and frogs and flowers blooming and fresh air and gardens, which remind us that God is always in the habit of bringing things back to life, that the world continues to turn and blossom and grow even when it feels like it has stopped.

A defense of hope in kids' laughter, which shows us that even when the world's crazy, there's something to find hysterical, from internet videos to silly jokes to made up games.

A defense of hope in the sunrise of tomorrow, which reminds us that even though we sometimes have no idea what day it is there is always the promise that if today didn't go so well, maybe tomorrow will be brighter, saner, easier, which shows us that even in a world untethered, there is still consistency. The promise that a new resurrection dawn is always just around the corner.

A defense of hope in music and spontaneous dance parties, which show us that sometimes silliness is the best medicine and the best antidote to despair and longing.

A defense of hope in families, friends, and pets, each in their own way a stunning, gracious reminder of God's love made evident in every moment

of our days. For Zoom meetings and virtual hugs and socially distant lunches and countless walks around the block that remind us just a little bit of normalcy and that we can still find joy when the world feels dark.

A defense of hope in youth groups, who remind us that God is present in the wackiest of moments and that the future of the church is in good hands, no matter what the church of the future looks like.

And yes, a defense of hope in God, in Christ, in faith, because the thing is...no, God never promised us a path that is easy, that isn't filled with potholes and question marks and backtracking, God never promised that the world wouldn't throw us things we don't know how to handle all the time, God never promised that things would be simple and that everything could be fixed in the blink of an eye if we just pray hard enough. But...God did promise us that we are never alone, that we aren't left to languish in the desert of uncertainty without God by our sides, walking with us, seeking to provide comfort and protection in whatever ways possible. God promises us on a daily basis that God has always been in the business of making something new and raising dead things back to new life, and that means in the very literal sense of resurrection to eternal life, but also in the simplicity of shining new light into corners that we fear may be perpetually dark.

People of God, hope is not fruitless, it's not pointless, but it's also not easy, we know this, on our best and worst days. Hope is one of the hardest things we do, because it calls us to believe in things we have not seen and trust in things that we have no tangible assurance of beyond the faith that burns in our hearts, and yet this is who we are, this is who the church has been from its very inception, a ragtag gathering of people who dare to hope in the midst of difficulty and doubt, and that is who we will continue to be, no matter how hard the world rages around us, no matter how much people tell me we're ridiculous for thinking it. And that is what gives me hope, that we do not do this alone, but together. So here's the last defense I've got...

A defense of hope in community...that we are all in this together, that even from six feet apart and computer screens away, we hold each other and walk this road together, that I know I stand here ardently clinging to my hope in the future and what will someday be a return to bright, beautiful normalcy, knowing that I do not do that alone, but with all of you. You all give me hope, with your love and your laughter and your quirks and your fierce commitment to God and each other. Us, together, is what gives me hope for the future, whatever that future looks like, because I know that no matter what, we will face it head on, as a family of God, unwilling to be shaken by whatever the world throws our way. My dear family of God,

keep on hoping, we're simply in the midst of our almost-ending, the real ending, the true ending, the happy ending will get here soon enough. **AMEN**