

Easter 6, Year A
Acts 17: 22-31
April 27, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Groping for God
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Did you catch the phrase buried in the middle of the first reading? Did you hear Paul say, “grope for God and maybe find him?”

Groping. I know a fair amount about groping. I’ve spent almost forty years groping for things. I now find myself groping for my glasses on a regular basis. Sometimes it’s the middle of the night. I can’t sleep, and I want to read. I reach out for my glasses on the bedside table. They aren’t there. I feel around and still can’t find them. I reach down to the floor and feel for them. Not there either. So in my head I run through a list of likely places—the bureau in the closet, the counter by the bathroom sink, Tim’s dresser, my dresser, my desk. In the dark, I stumble out of bed and feel my way through all the possibilities.

I suspect I’m not the only person here familiar with groping in the dark. I can imagine that more than one of you has reached out your hand, palm side down, to feel for something important, something you need, something you really can’t live without.

Groping in the dark. There’s art to it. It’s best if you do it with your hands open and palms face down. That way you can cover more territory. It helps to be flexible. To try different surfaces. To move your palms up and down as well as all around. You have to be ready to move your body as well. You have to be ready to stumble around if you’re groping in the dark.

The Apostle Paul knew a thing or two about groping in the dark. In his life he’d done a lot of groping in his dark. Trying to find his place, his niche. Trying to find something he could count on. Something worth serving. Groping for God. I can imagine he knew a fellow groper for God when he saw one. To Athenians gathered at the Aeropagus—that formal court of public opinion where the relative merits of ideas were weighed—the Apostle Paul said,

Athenians, (Paul might have said, “Fellow gropers for God”) I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown God.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him....

Like the world Paul encountered in Athens, ours is a culture rife with groping—groping for meaning, groping for connection, groping for something beyond ourselves. Think of the many ways people right here in our community—right here in Sonoma—express this hunger for meaning and connection.

Often in our “spiritual but not religious” culture, folks think that groping for meaning and connection—groping for an unknown God if you will—is principally the work of folks you never find in church, folks who do not eat at this welcome table. But I wonder.

I wonder if that longing is limited to the unchurched amongst us. I wonder if you, like me, sometimes find yourself longing for God. I wonder if there are times in your life when you wonder just where God is. I wonder, if sometimes you find yourself groping in the dark for a God you hope is there.

I think we all grope for God. I think we all wonder—at one time or another—“Where was God when....” or “Where is God now?” I suspect many of us have found ourselves saying, “God, if you’re there....” I imagine we all share a certain kinship with Job.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence of things not seen.”

At its core faith is groping—groping in the dark of things not seen, groping with the assurance that that for which you long is there.

Faith and groping in the dark go hand in hand—they’re part and parcel of one another.

Think of Jesus in the Garden and Jesus on the Cross. Remember how he asked that the cup be taken from him; remember his haunting words from the Cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

I’ve always been struck by Jesus’ words in the Garden and his words from the Cross. They give me a strange comfort when I find myself groping for God. Even in the hour of his distress, even in the darkness of his forsakenness Jesus calls on God. For even on the Cross, Jesus gropes for God. And that gives me hope—hope that in the hour of my doubt, hope that in the darkness of my despair, my groping is not in vain.

Faith—it’s the assurance of things groped for, the confidence in things not seen.

It’s not a matter of **having** that which we hope for; it’s not a matter of **seeing** that which we seek. It’s a matter of knowing deep in our hearts that the one we seek seeks us as well. It’s a matter of groping for God—the God “in whom we live and move and have our being.”

How does the hymn go—we walk by faith and not by sight.

Walk with me in faith this week as together we grope for God. Amen.