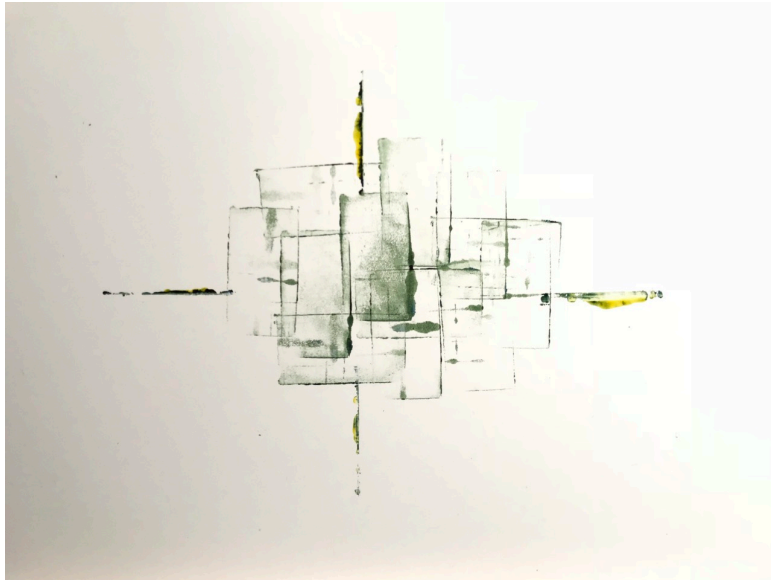


## on hope - Robert Steiner

*We live and don't think ourselves into hope.*



- Viewings, Robert Stone

### Living into hope

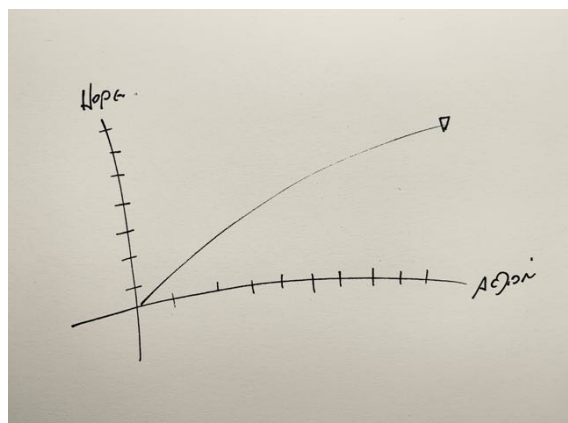
It is not always easy to remain hopeful. And at a time when even the survival of homo sapiens on this planet earth seems to be uncertain, it is not surprising that people look to faith communities for reassurance and certainty. Certainty is seen to be the basis for a life lived in hope. But is the role of faith to offer certainty? And is it true that hope requires certainty? And what does certainty mean in each instance?

For some faith has to be able to offer the certainty of dogmatic truths that cannot and will not be questioned. To believe is to hold a certain set of doctrines to be true. And such firm knowledge is seen to be the rock of hope in the rising sea of relativism. But what if, to speak with Richard Rohr, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. In other words, what if faith is actually about learning to accept and even embrace the contradictions and paradoxes of life, becoming more comfortable and less anxious about feeling uncertain about certain truths. After all faith is, as described in the Gospels, not about seeing, but believing, and believing is about trusting that there is a greater love to hold and enfold us. To what extent is the admission of a sense of uncertainty also not a more honest and more appropriate attitude when it comes to both understanding the divine and the endless suffering in the world. All too often, those who promise absolute certainty do so in order to assume control and power over other people. Such certainty is at best a dangerous illusion and at worst the kind of stuff religious and political demagogues use to recruit and manipulate their followers. It is the kind of certainty that is used to divide the world into groups of us and them, good and evil, blessed and cursed.

Our yearning for certainty makes us an easy prey for fanatics that preach purity and superiority. But what happens to hope in the process of such indoctrination? It becomes the hope of a few chosen ones. It encourages separation instead of compassion. It is driven by fear and not by love. A healthy approach to questions of faith resists the desire for such certainty and is suspicious of philosophical, political, and theological doctrines that do not allow for newness of thought and self-critical examination. For the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch there cannot be hope without a willingness to embrace a degree of uncertainty, which for him is the capacity for a

radical openness and a willingness to question all forms of closed systems. In the forward to his book *The Principle of Hope* he states: "Only with the farewell to the closed, static concept of being does the real dimension of hope open." We are called to be beware of ideologies that propagage certainty and thereby rob us of an openendedness without which hope cannot survive. If we follow Bloch's argument, then uncertainty can in fact be seen as a powerful force that inspires and grows hope. A wonderful twist to the dominant belief that hope is based on experiences of certainty. Both radical pessimism and naive optimism (for some a form of denialism) each in their own way do not tolerate uncertainty and in that sense quench hope. The former is not daring enough and the latter is too daring. Both, in some ways, claim to know too much. The predictions on global warming, for example, and its consequences need to be viewed in the light of this discussion. As a faith community we need to find our place somewhere on the spectrum between the pessimists and the optimists (and/or denialists) and to model a way of living into hope which appreciates the gift within the gift of uncertainty, the surplus of grace.

Karl Barth, one of the most eminent theologians of the 20th century, maintained, that we have to read the bible in the one hand, while holding the newspaper in the other. But to his friend, Eduard Thurneysen (cf. Barth to Thurneysen on 11.11.1918, in: Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe, editor Eberhard Bush) he did express the despair and puzzlement that can come with reading both at the same time: "One broods alternately over the newspaper and the New Testament and actually sees fearfully little of the organic connection between the two worlds concerning which one should now be able to give a clear and powerful witness" (in: *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, p.45).



In the following I hope to build a bridge between those two worlds and to suggest a few small steps towards learning how to bear witness to hope. What will become clear is that we do not think but live ourselves into hope through moving to concrete action and participation, forms of embodied hope.

## A „grand pause“

The first step is paradoxically always about not taking the next step. For a moment we interrupt our routine. We slow down, stop and take time to reflect on where we are in life. Such stock taking can mark a dramatic turn. It can be a short break during the day, or a proper holiday. Pauses are important in many areas of our lives as they are in music.



I have invited Willem Luitingh, our organist and pianist, to choose a piece of classical music which would illustrate the power and importance of pauses in music. He played us the opening part of Beethoven's Pathétique and helped us to understand why Mozart believed that dramatic pauses are even more important than the music itself. In fact, the most powerful effect in music is according to Mozart - no music. If this is true for music, then it is also true for all kinds of creative presentations as storytelling, teaching, praying and preaching. And it is rather humbling when you are told as a speaker or lecturer that your most powerful moments were when you were not speaking, when you dared to make a pause and allowed the pause to create its own drama and meaning. Teju Cole, a Nigerian-American writer, photographer and art historian, beautifully captured the gift of such a pause in the piece titled "Zürich."

*Kitchen to living room. Bedroom to bathroom. Downstairs to get the mail. House to subway. An evening stroll. You take around 7500 steps each day. If you live to eighty, in - shallah, that comes to 200 million steps over the course of your life, a hundred thousand miles. You don't consider yourself a great walker, but you will have circumnavigated the globe on foot four times over. Downstairs to get the mail. Basement for laundry. Living room to bedroom. Up in the middle of the night for a glass of water. Walking through the darkened house, you suddenly pause. (Zürich, Blind Spots)*

One would hope that a church service opens up such spaces of stillness, of stilled lives, filled with meaningful pauses, dramatizing the beginning of a new way of being and thinking. I cannot help but think that Jesus, the great teacher of wisdom and the mysteries of the kingdom of God must have been a master when it came to making pauses - in the boat, on the mountain, at the table. And certainly holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, presents us with one of the most dramatic divine pauses that our liturgical calendar knows.

## Daydreaming



A forest dreams to be a labyrinth.

- *Daydreaming*, Robert Stone

One could think of day dreaming as another way of taking a break, of making a pause. For a moment we let our thoughts wander and allow our imagination to present us with another reality, a parallel world. It can be a playful interruption or a painful remembering. It might surprise us without warning or we choose to steal ourselves away, finding shelter and refuge in a beautiful dream, a distant land, or a warm embrace. In his introduction to *The Principle of Hope* Ernst Bloch reflects on the ambivalent nature of daydreams:

*Everybody's life is pervaded by daydreams: one part of this is just stale, even enervating escapism, even booty for swindlers, but another part is provocative, is not content just to accept the bad which exists, does not accept*

*renunciation. This other part has hoping at its core, and is teachable.*

While we tend to judge daydreaming as a way of escaping reality, Bloch recognize its capacity to inspire hope and undermine the status quo. He therefore encourages a deeper knowing of those dreams and to allow them to “grow really fuller, that is, clearer, less random, more familiar, more clearly understood and more mediated with the course of things.” He encourage us to work with our dreams in a way that they gain clarity and focus and begin to engage the experiences of everyday life.

## The mere observer



- *the Observer*, Robert Stone

There are those who lament the state of the world and wait for assurances before responding with action. They could do with more pauses and daydreaming. Only if a happy ending is guaranteed will they act. But there is no guarantee that humankind will continue to exist and evolve. Who knows what catastrophes our children and grandchildren will have to face. And if we consider the kind of end times scenarios of apocalyptic visions, then the rainbow does not seem to protect us from cosmic cataclysms. But can one then still remain hopeful and what does this hope then consist of? Is it in the end about acting as if salvation could still be possible? Or is hope about learning not to think, but to live into concrete actions that instill hope by way of their integrity and beauty? After all, is an action only meaningful, if it is successful? Certainly not. There are acts of love and compassion which did not have the hoped for end result, and yet they inspired new acts of love that in turn gave rise to hopeful expectations, restored agency and encouraged responsibility. Remember Martin Luther's beautiful confession: And even if the world ends tomorrow, today I will plant an apple tree.



He does not deny the possibility of an end, but he still believes in the gift and meaningfulness of planting an apple tree. It is not a naive optimism. He understands himself as having the role of an agent of change and of

hope. He affirms his freedom to act and to protect. An action does not have to lead to success to be justified. Some actions justify themselves in the way they affirm the gift of love and compassion, the call to protect and nurture, to care and serve, not matter the outcome. With the words of Steffensky: "Love and justice heal and sanctify a human being; it does not first take success as the result of love and justice." (My translation.)

We owe such commitment to our descendents. After all at this stage we do not quite know if we are doomed or destined for a radical turn around. Remember the sermon of Jona about the impending catastrophe. The king's response was a call to repentance and lament and then he said: "Who knows! Maybe God will be merciful and will let go of his anger, so that we will not be destroyed!" Who knows! It can be a statement of hope which provokes us into responsible action. It is the kind of action, that affirms our freedom and ability to create a more just world. In this sense hope is not a matter of theoretical insight or expectation. It is rather the very quality of our action. In other words: Can we commit ourselves to deeds of love, respect and care that speak to our children and grandchildren of hope? We might struggle to come up with a convincing model or narrative of hope. But our daily actions can transcend such struggle and guide us on living into such hope. We know that one little deed can speak more than a thousand words. Bloch wisely said, slightly modified by Steffensky: God grants us the potion of hope not only as something to drink, but also as something to cook with. It is very clear: Faith and hope will not survive if they remain a concept or thought. Faith and hope seek embodiment to stay alive.

Those who walk the journey of hope will have to fight of attacks from two sides: There are those who preach the end of times and that whatever we do, we are doomed. And then there are those who intellectualize the challenge and argue cynically that all efforts will be in vane. Very often you need to live with a certain comfort to afford such a worldview. A good example would be the attempt of a school class to clean up the shore of one of Cape Town polluted rivers. Yes of course, someone could argue and say to them that what they are doing is a waste of time. Nothing will change. Even worse would be to accuse them of mainly doing this to ease their and our conscience. But now we have the instruments to deal with such cynicism and pessimism. Such hopeful action defies a logic which needs success to be hopeful. Such hopeful action affirms agency, responsibility, care, love and compassion. And so such action does not need any further justification, does not need the success of numbers and statistics. Such action alligns itself with the king of Niniveh when he says: Who knows!

One could come to the liberating experience of action from another angle. The writer Johannes Bobrowski once poignantly wrote that "The mere observer sees nothing." The observation refers to the resigned observer who only sees what is and is blinded by the presence. Hope, by contrast, sees what can be and what can become. It has been said that Christians are people of the dawn and not of the dusk. We are not entering another night, but coming out of the night and awaiting a new day. Such expectation is not a theoretical construct, but the result of engagement and action. It is along those lines that Steffensky is quite adamant that "One cannot think, what one doesn't enact. One cannot believe, what one doesn't work on." (My translation.)

Those who remain mere observers will not be able to understand the freedom and dignity that lies in taking action. The antidote to cynicism and doubt, despair and helplessness is not a deeper theoretical understanding of hope, on whatever basis, but a concrete commitment to action. When studying the writings of Martin Luther king one will apparently not find a single passage where the meaning and purpose of the fight for equality is questioned. The actual work and concrete action on the ground set him free from the need to see clear results and have a happy ending guaranteed. The struggle for freedom in itself had value, had beauty, had dignity, and carried a promise more beautiful than any kind of certainty. When Dan Adams ran a *Sources of Strength* workshop at our congregation, working mainly with young adults around depression and suicide, he made it clear that for some concrete participation in acts of service in the community can become a source of new hope and provide a more positive outlook on life. What a gift it is to discover that I have something to offer and that my contribution can make a difference in someone else's life. And very often those who comfort get in turn comforted themselves.

## Images of hope



- *Never again*, Robert Stone

The researcher John D. Morris traced more than 200 myths on floods, from ancient China and India to Africa and America. What all those different stories have in common is the attempt to make sense of the destructive forces of nature. And usually they are portrayed as a divine act of retribution. To be sure: What those stories also share is a very dim few of the human heart. It is a heart that believes that what it deserves is violent punishment. It is a heart that continues to create God in its own anxious image: impatient, strict, punitive and unforgiving. It is a heart left behind and left alone with its imperfection, trapped in guilt and shame. It is a small step from there to believe that God must at some stage get tired of us, that the only solution is a final solution, the wiping out of the human race from the face of the earth. With the exception of Noah of course. But Noah is more an anti-hero than anything else. All he does is save his own skin and his own family. A far call from Abraham who pleaded with God outside of the gates of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The beauty of the biblical story is, of course, that it does not stop there. It ends, not with the capitulation of the human heart but with the transformation of God's heart. God comes to the realization that the human heart will never ever really change for the good. And so the only way to continue to maintain this relationship is by giving it the signature of the rainbow. It is a bow at rest and comes with God's promise to never ever respond with punitive retribution. It is a Gospel moment. I am pausing and taking in a deep breath as I stand in admiration and wonder of my ancestors who were able to imagine a God willing to refrain from violence and retribution, able to envision a God who would remain loyal, compassionate, and forgiving, independent from our actions. It is a declaration of unconditional love: Never again! To read and hear this is to know that the invitation to a new life is always there. We begin again and do not have to live in fear. God is able to hold us and enfold us, despite our shortcomings, failures, and defeats. It is, of course, a covenant made not only with human beings, but with the whole animal and natural world. God has become our ally

The dream of a new human being is as ancient and old as the myth of the flood. And throughout the ages this dream sparked off revolutions that became regimes of terror and violence. All done in the name of that dream. And here we are as compromised and torn as ever, finding it hard to change, to transform in a way that makes our lives on this planet more sustainable. Would it not be fair to say that the dream of a new new human being remains an illusion, a dangerous illusion? More recent attempts to interfere with our genetic make up are also part of that dream of a new human being. But what will the costs be once we are able to guarantee a designer baby.



## Speaking in other tongues



- *Citings*, Robert Stone

We do not have any guarantees regarding our future. But what we have are promises, visions and songs, that want us to remain hopeful and committed. Think of the visions of the prophets Isaiah or Amos: Deserts will blossom, justice will flow like a river, and a child play at the viper's nest. They dream of a world that has overcome hatred and fear, violence and war. In new languages and tongues they invite us to imagine a different world and to believe that transformation is possible. Our faith tradition is built around their dreams of new life and new beginnings. Such visions keep us on our toes. We are not allowed to feel fully home. They make us strangers in our own lands. They also call us into responsibility, to to be a credible witness to such hope. Our faith tradition encourages us to talk about the big dreams and hopes that God has for us and this world. And in that way we build our own dreams and hopes. But that is where we need to start. A Sunday morning service also allows us to speak in other tongues. With tongues I mean the language of the different hymns, the songs, the prayers, the readings, the poems. What I notice is that it is such a tremendous help to have those words and texts, spoken and sung, to fall back on. I don't have to invent a new language. I am allowed to speak with their words and in their language.

Thank you Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, all you prophets and witnesses of hope. And thank you Jesus for bring this prophetic tradition to a culmination with your life and ministry. I keep learning your language, learning to speak in other tongues, hoping to make this the language of my heart. And then my community becomes even bigger an taller, made up not only of those present, but all those who have gone before us and have been a witness to hope. To believe also means to believe those witnesses their belief. I am surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. I am not alone when challenged about my faith, and hope, and love. I don't have to defend and justify myself all by myself. No, I stand on their shoulders and hope that my shoulders will be strong enough one day, to carry the hopes and dreams of the next generation. Maybe one day will not only be asked about what we did or didn't do, but also about what the visions were that guided us. In other words, we are also responsible for our dreams and our hopes. They call us to resist cynicism and indifference. Yes, and I have to acknowledge, that the victims of this world keep pushing me to make promises that are far bigger than my heart. For their sake I keep proclaiming that death will not have the final word. For their sake I will keep repeating that they are not forgotten.

And so we keep singing, with the words of those who have gone before us, "We shall overcome." We shall

overcome, one day! We shall live in peace, one day! The longer you sing it and the more join you singing it, the greater the wave of hope that carries you. Partly because at that very moment we feel something of that peace present among us, present in an extraordinary moment of solidarity and commitment. This is how it often feels when we gather in a circle and sing this song at Maximum prison. It is a vision that includes both the victim and the perpetrator.

## Courage and anger



- *Garden of Virtues*, Robert Stone

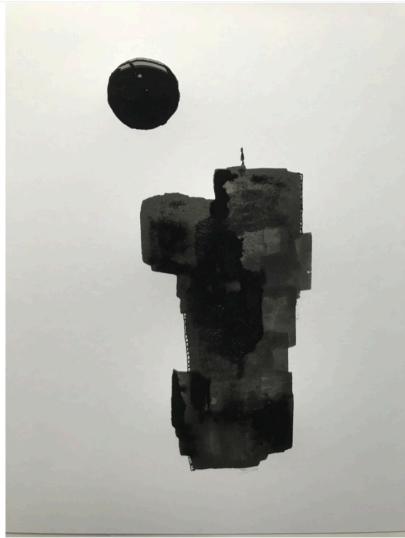
The hope of our children relies on the question if they will be able to remember something good about us. But what will be the stories that our children remember about us? To care for our children is not just about food and safety. It is also about stories that feed the heart and soul. They need something good and beautiful to remember, something that will give them courage and compassion. And will they remember us as people of hope, of vision, of commitment? What do children mean when they say they had a good father or a good mother? And will that memory be life-giving? We know of course also what a weight and burden it can be for children, when their own parents were implicated in gross acts of injustice and violence. We are responsible for the hopes of our children!

Yes, hope needs courage, a courage that is deeply rooted in love. Without love no courage, and without courage no love. The English word courage has a Latin root, deriving from the Latin "cor" which means heart. In other words, a human being can be courageous, when his or her heart is in the right place, when his or her heart identifies with someone or something, when he or she has a heart for something or someone. True courage sources itself from love. A strong and courageous heart is therefore a deeply compassionate and caring heart, vulnerable and empathetic.

It is good when a courageous heart in the best sense of the world is able to show and express anger. For anger allows us for a moment to be one-sided. Anger can open the eyes for injustice. Anger gives voice to the silenced and rejected. Again, just as with courage, not all anger is life-giving. But sometimes there are moments where we should be more angry and less moderate or even neutral. Anger can be the gift of a strong heart, empowering us to take a stand, to take sides, to be boldly biased.



# Prayer



You will have to explain yourself - now!

- *Mooning*, Robert Stone

Prayer can become the place of hope where we are able to face the contradictions of this life and this world without fear and without the need to gloss over them or deny them. When praying we allow ourselves to move beyond our desperate attempts of having to explain them logically. No philosopher and no theologian will be able to help us to find a convincing argument and solution for what we are experiencing. At worst they will have to acknowledge that in their arrogance they claimed to know too much. At best they will be able to help us live more courageously and patiently with the questions that our existence on earth raises. The beauty of prayer is that we dare to say and proclaim things, we wouldn't be able to communicate otherwise. In prayer we give thanks for God's mercy and care, even though our daily lives might at the moment not speak of such divine abundance. Think of how the Psalmists kept praising God despite their own difficult circumstances. They kept holding on to another, more gracious reality, they believed kept enfolding them. In that way prayer can become a place of tremendous hope, a hope that is brazen and sassy. Prayer, then, is not a desperate flight into one's interior life, far removed from actual reality. Prayer helps us to give concrete shape and expression to a hope that is rooted in something much deeper than the reality that is visible to our eyes.

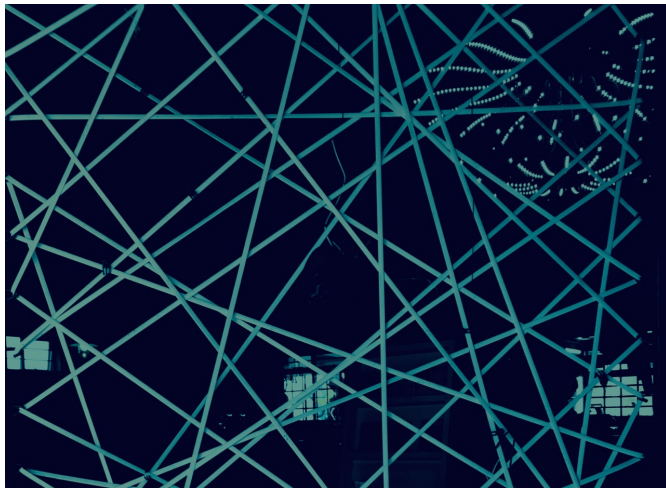
Such a more contemplative gaze allows us to be a more faithful witness to the rainbow and its biblical symbolism. Even when such witness is clouded by terrible cyclones and floods destroying the livelihood of thousands and causing the cruel drowning of hundreds of people surprised by floods in the middle of the night. I am thinking of the recent devastations that cyclones caused in several African countries. Yes, there are disasters caused by human beings. But there also natural catastrophes for which we cannot be blamed. And either way, we have to keep asking: Has God forgotten the rainbow? It does not make faith any easier.

We suffer, not only illnesses, catastrophes, injustice and personal tragedies, but we also suffer a God, who makes it difficult to remain hopeful. We suffer God's darkness, God's seeming indifference and remoteness. And dare we say that the rainbow reminds us, that God owes us! I would like to pray and say: God, please explain yourself to us. How are we to be your witness, if you let us down, if you do not keep your promise of "never again". I am tired of having to be your professional advocate. I am tired of having to find clever explanations and excuses to get you off the hook. Yes, I know that your ways are not our ways, and your thoughts are not our thoughts. And I know that we are to blame for much of the suffering and injustice. But, there is this promise you

have made. There is this covenant to which you have committed yourself. And then there are those enormous contradictions between your promise and the conditions of the world. How are we to bridge such abyss. And if we clearly cannot trust ourselves, how are we to cope with not being able to trust you? What on earth is going on? There are plenty of reasons to doubt the goodness of life.

At least, one cannot accuse us of being naive and blind. And maybe such honest interrogation can help to make our language purer, more believable and more audible. Those questions drive us back to the old question raised in the Psalms: God, what are you waiting for? When are you coming? And that is certainly a question we should never give up asking, despite all contradictions and devastations. Hope keeps asking God: When do you come? When will you be God, finally God. To allow ourselves to feel God's absence, to miss God's presence characterizes a faith come of age, more mature and more sincere, less subversive and submissive, more resistant and rebellious. Not just for our sake, but also for God's sake. Just as the Psalmists we are not only concerned about our reputation, but God's reputation is at stake. So when will you be God? When will you wipe away the tears and heal what is broken. Yes, in Christ you have suffered our human existence, in all its darkness. But we want more than such suffering solidarity. We want resurrection for all!

## Community



- *Webbing Community*, Robert Stone

One cannot survive all by oneself. Our great gift: We are not alone. On Sunday morning we pause, as a community of people whose paths have crossed in a significant way. And as we sing together, we encourage each other. Some have come here even though they struggle to believe, to hope, to sing, to pray. Or should one rather say: They have come here because they themselves struggle to do so. But it is good to be in company of those who can, to listen to them, to be carried by their words and songs, to allow them to step in for us at a moment when life has silenced us. It is good to be reminded that my life and faith is much bigger than my little heart. I am not the body of Christ by myself, but we are that body together as a community. I don't have to be everything to everyone. I am allowed to have limited and deficits. Others will fill that gap, and I will fill their gaps. This pilgrimage of faith is not a solo marathon. It is a big family affair. And the race is only over, once the last one has crossed the line. And we could even say, as we have seen in some races: Just before the finish line, we stop, we pause, we wait, for everyone else to catch up, and then, only then, will we cross that line together.

(The sermon has been inspired by Fulbert Steffensky's talk "Was unsere Hoffnung nährt", presented on 11th June 2016 at the 7th Ostfriesischen Kirchentag in Rhaderfehn.)