Fear can be a powerful thing, and since Covid began, we've certainly dealt with a lot of it.

On the one hand fear can be positive; it can remind us of danger and we can answer it with prudence discerning what to do and what not to do. But on the other, fear can sometimes cause our mind to race as we try to control things that we can't always control. Recently someone spoke to me about that, commenting that he felt some of the response to Covid that we have seen, with some people thinking if only they do this or that they can make Covid go away, might indicate a fear of dying that people aren't used to confronting, which is particularly difficult if a person has no faith in God and thinks all there is is this world. Indeed, if that is the case, not just with Covid, a person ends up trying to control their life, sometimes going it alone as much as possible and thinking of death as out of sight, out of mind.

But what if we as Christians embraced hope? Not just the hope of one day being in heaven. But the hope that is a virtue; namely where we have the hope for heaven one day and being with the Ascended Lord there, but also not gazing up at the sky so much as going out into this world and making a difference. By realizing that as Christians we are loved by our Lord, and

that as He died we will too, but so too will we rise with Him and can follow Him to heaven, but that this also requires doing what He tells us in the Gospel, “proclaiming the Gospel?” What we might find is that coming to know our Lord, we move forward without fear, but we also realize that each of us can what Jesus asks us to be: an evangelist through words and actions.

John Haney learned this through his remarkable 98-year old grandmother most recently, when like so many of us he dealt with the fears of having to say a temporary goodbye to her as she dealt with the risks of Covid in her assisted living facility.

Going back to the height of the pandemic, John recalls pulling his cell phone from his pocket, steeling himself to call his grandma in a nursing home some 500 miles away in Ohio. Why is this so hard, he thought? Before Covid, he looked forward to these calls. He thought of them as doing his part to help care for her. Now he wondered if he was making any difference in the face of a deadly pandemic, especially one that was hitting care facilities so hard.

Quickly he reviewed the list of things he'd come up with to tell her, the latest games his three-year-old, Amelia, was into: baking cakes for stuffed animals and dancing to Baby Shark with her brother. The word combinations, Jack, now two, was saying: "Doggie, woof. Daddy, bye bye." Silly stuff his grandma delighted in hearing.

John's grandma was more than a grandma to him. He was 12 when he went to live with her while his parents split up. She'd supported his dream of going into the Air Force and so many other things. He wanted to be there for her now if only over the phone. Ordinarily he'd make time to visit, but her facility was in lockdown.

Those restrictions should have reassured John that she was safe, so he thought. Instead, it felt as if she were living on the moon. He couldn't imagine what his grandma was going through in such isolation. She was 98. Macular degeneration made it impossible for her to read. Or even watch TV. He understood the need for isolation, but separation carried its own health risks.

Maybe it was he who was the problem, he thought. He got tongue-tied when he tried to say anything deeper than the usual updates about the kids. He couldn't spout Scripture the way others could. He wasn't comfortable speaking for God, period. Not that he was out of touch with his feelings. He just didn't have a firm enough grasp on them to talk openly, to offer hope and reassurance and comfort.

In the military, John says they used to say, "Hope for the best, plan for the worst." These days he found himself mostly doing the latter. He worked as a consultant, helping businesses manage change. He'd seen too much to pretend that everything always turned out for the best.

Enough stalling. It had been two weeks since his last call. He tapped in the number. He waited for her answering machine to pick up so he could announce himself. "Hi, John!" his grandma's voice sang out. "So good to hear from you!"

"Wow, Grandma, you sound great. How are things going up there?"

Without missing a beat, she launched into a detailed report on the family happenings. “Your mom called yesterday and said she was doing yardwork and rummage sale stuff at church. Uncle Chris came out of retirement to help coach the Mount Gilead football team.”

She breezed through updates on all four of her kids, nine grandkids and 10 great-grandkids, throwing in colorful commentary along the way. Almost all of it was news to John. Still, she hadn’t said one word about life in lockdown. Was she in denial?

“So…how are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m good,” she said. “There’s no place I need to be, no schedules. My only complaint is the chef.”

“Oh, no,” he said. “Is the food not good there?”

“It’s too good,” she said, laughing. “She’s trying to make us all fat.”

John laughed with his grandma, comforted that, despite everything going on, her sense of humor, like the rest of her, was razor-sharp. He was relieved that she was doing so well.

“I just want you to know how much I love you,” he said. “Take care and we’ll talk soon.” John hung up the phone. It felt as if a load had been lifted from him, though he wasn’t sure he’d done anything for his grandma.

A few days later, he heard the news he dreaded. Someone had tested positive in Grandma’s facility, his mom told him. It seemed only a matter of time before the virus was everywhere there, like a ticking bomb. He thought about calling his grandma, but other than saying he was scared for her, what did he have to share? He didn’t have any actual news.

He didn’t want to alarm her. So, he waited, and with every day they didn’t talk John’s fears grew. Grandma had led a life rooted in purpose. He remembered her telling him about growing up in the Great Depression. How her parents, who’d never been able to buy her a bike, had still managed to find ways to help those even less fortunate.

His grandma had enrolled in nursing school, then had to withdraw to care for her ailing mother. When the dean had urged her to put her career first, she'd told her, "This is my family. I owe them everything!"

With the country's entry into World War II, the nursing program experienced a surge of applications. His grandma had to wait another semester to enroll, months she spent working in a factory building relays for submarines. Eventually she went on to nurse injured soldiers.

His grandma's service inspired John to enter the Air Force Academy after terrorists attacked our country on 9/11, during his senior year of high school. The academy was so much tougher than he'd ever imagined. Maybe he wouldn't make it through basic. But his grandma urged him to persevere.

"This too shall pass," she said. "Lean on God. He'll see you through." Her whole life had been a testimony to her faith. Surely it would see her through now.

When he called his grandma next, however, she sounded down. “I guess you heard someone here tested positive,” she said. “It’s getting bad.”

John struggled with what to say. Reflexively he asked about family. She barely engaged. “I bet you saw some difficult things as a nurse,” John said, hoping to remind her of the strength he’d always seen in her.

For the longest time, the phone was silent. John was worried he had said something wrong? Should he have stuck to small talk? Finally his grandma spoke. “After the war, there was the polio epidemic,” she said slowly, summoning the memory. “The hospital was lined wall to wall with kids in bed, suffering. I felt helpless.”

She paused. He had never heard her sound this vulnerable. “But you know what?” she continued, her voice rising. “We prayed and prayed and loved on those kids, and then the vaccine came out and it was a miracle. God can do amazing things.”

He surely can, John thought. They talked a little while longer. Finally it was time to say goodbye.

“I’ve lived a good life, and when the Lord calls me home, I’ll be ready,” she said.

“I want you to stick around a little longer,” John said. “At least make it to 100.” He hung up feeling positive, comforted, as he always did after talking with her. Had he been a help to her?

Soon he got another dreaded call, this time from his uncle. “Grandma had a mini-stroke,” he said. “Her vision is much worse. The doctor says she’s legally blind. For now, she’s still in the same facility, but she’ll likely need more care.”

The news was a punch to the gut. God, how much more can she bear? This time he called immediately.

“Hi, John!” she answered, her voice bubbling with life. “I’m so happy you called!” He wondered again if she was in some kind of denial.

“I was sorry to hear about your mini-stroke,” John said. “But you sound good. Great, actually. I don’t know how you do it.”

“John,” she said, “I grew up in the Depression. My parents taught me that you can always try harder even when you think you can’t, pray harder when you think you can’t. I try to stay positive, no matter what. And what helps me most is talking to you kids. It means the world to me. I feel…cared for. I’m so proud of all of you. I have so much to be grateful for, even stuck in this facility. My life feels fuller hearing about everything you guys are doing. Keep the calls coming! They’re an answer to prayer.”

Suddenly the phone in John’s hand felt like a lifeline—one that reached both ways. In the midst of all the tumult and uncertainty of Covid, he was helping his grandma stay positive and she was helping him.

The only thing she was in denial of was negativity. John said he could be that way too. Hope for the best and pray, he says. And don’t forget to call your grandma.

As humans, we can often be in denial; in particular about our own mortality. It's unpleasant to think about, so out of sight out of of mind. But then we are inevitably confronted with death; we've seen the suffering of Covid. And now we are finally beginning to emerge from it. But as we go forward, Covid will still be there in some form. As will all kinds of risks; some people today will die suddenly; others get a horrible diagnosis or face the loss of a loved one; others will confront the suffering and hardships of daily life; or their own sins that bring them down or the sins of others that impact them. So what are we to do? The answer is found in keeping our eyes fixed on heaven, but also living in this world knowing we are not alone and fear need not take over our lives, but we go forward with comfort knowing God is with us, and we help one another along the journey.

Back in February, we began the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday with the stark reminder of our own mortality in the ashes. From dust you came, to dust you shall return. This is important to remember. And we have to be at peace with that rather than ignore it. But we have to have the right perspective on it too. For the resurrection changes everything. Jesus rises, but we also rise with Him. And the Ascension gives us the right compass if you will. Through Jesus, humanity ha returned home to a state of friendship

with God, and this far exceeds anything that ever was. In Jesus we see victory for our Lord but for all of us. The ascension is a sort of homecoming for our Lord, but for you and me as well. Heaven is what eye has not seen and ear has not heard. It is not a place but a state of reality where we enjoy eternal happiness that cannot end. And that is why while it is quite alright to have some fear of death, we can also take comfort in that where Jesus has gone, we can follow. Its why John's grandma was so much at peace as she nears the end of her life. It's why in so many people I've visited as a priest who are seriously ill, from my grandma Pat when I was in seminary to Sharon Peters, a longtime parishioner who just entered eternal life yesterday, in so many of these people I've found peace. They have faith; they know they are going home.

And this gets at the second point: death will come for us all, but through it all Jesus is with us. In the collect for today we say "we pray that in accordance with his promise, we may be worthy for him to live with us always on earth." Jesus also promises to send the Spirit who will strengthen the disciples. We receive this at Confirmation. But when we come to Mass, and gather around this altar, we receive our Lord and are again reminded of how much God loves us. Jesus ascends to heaven, but

He also promises to remain with us and we must never forget that He is always there. John's grandma sums it up best: God can do amazing things. And He never abandons us.

How people come to realize this though is through you and me. Jesus calls you and me to be an evangelist, and how we do that takes so many forms. Think of John's grandmother and all she did in her life both as a mom and grandmother, serving her country in the factories during World War II, and then as a nurse. The Spirit gives us the tools. Saint Paul says live in a manner worth of the call you have received. These include humility, gentleness, patience, peace and hope. Inside all of us is the ability to manifest the love of God. We do this through words; for John and his grandma it was their conversations that meant so much. Sometimes it's the words of comfort. Sometimes we need to speak the words of challenge too. For instance maybe an 8 year old lovingly says to their parents we were at Mass this week in school, how come we do not go on Sunday? Or a parent is willing to be the bad guy and say the word "no" when they recognize their child could make a bad mistake. Or when everyone is going along with something we know to be immoral, we are the one in the group who says "no, this is wrong." Or we speak lovingly to someone in private who is

making a bad decision, or fallen away from their faith. And of course there is also the evangelization without words; the kindness and acts of mercy we do for one another; the volunteering in our parish; the patience we show to those who wrong us; the true tolerance we show to those who are different from us in politics or religion; by loving our enemies. All of these are all part of evangelization. Today is probably a good day to reflect on the words of Saint Teresa of Avila, a doctor of the Church: Christ has no body but yours. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands; yours are the feet. Yours are the eyes; you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours.

As Jesus says, “Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature.” That’s what John’s grandma did through her life, and in that phone call where she gave her grandson hope - a hope she lived out.

These past few weeks many of us have had hope again. The vaccines are helping. Masks are beginning to fade as we see our neighbor’s faces again. The State Fair is returning. Life is slowly seeing more normalcy. But let us never forget, the goal of this life is not to get out of here as soon as

possible, nor is it to cling to this life as much as possible. The goal is to get to heaven. Jesus showed us how to get there. And we can one day. But He also showed us how to truly live. So let us not let fear of death and things we can't control take over our lives. Rather let us truly be not afraid, for Jesus is with us - not gone in heaven, but alive here in this world too, forever King, and empowering us with His love and the Holy Spirit. May that fill us with hope we we go out and proclaim the Good news, and may our hearts and minds be open so that we can better be Christ's body here on earth.