Thank you to the gatherers and to the gathered here. Thank you to the food that nourished me this morning, the hands that made it, the hands that grew, processed, brought it to me, the earth, rain, sun, pollinators and other creatures that made that possible, and the thing I cannot adequately name who made it all. I am talking to you from the Liberties, in Dublin.

It is important maybe to establish at the start that the person speaking to you has, from the age of 8, been defined by an experience of immigration. I moved to the US from Communist Romania in 1988. And from the age of 18, something more like migrancy, as I have not lived anywhere longer than 3 years since then. I moved to Dublin in 2017 and so far have no plans to leave, so this may be the year I break this pattern. There are aspects of my life—being identified as white, having the biological gender that feels right to me, being educated and located in the Global north—that align me to a degree with what is considered normal, and therefore has power within society. There are, likewise, aspects of my identity that call me to value all that exists in the margins, whether voluntarily or not. Quaker faith and history are themselves proof that there is imagination and creativity and a moral imperative in the margins.

Having said that, I would like to warn you that although I deeply believe in imagining a future as clear, clean and beautiful as can be, I also hold space for an equally deep call within me, to learn how to die well, as an individual, and maybe as a species. These are not contradictory. I believe that learning how to grieve well in this moment is, paradoxically, an invitation to greater life. For this I will make use of some very ancient scripture, but I want to start with the words of a more recent voice, that of the Nigerian-Indian writer and theologian Bayo Akomolafe:

“My dream is not of human rights and inclusion into an exhausted colonial order. My dream is an electric hymn sung by gut bacteria… of cell transfers that queer sources, unsettle originals, and disturb the idea that identity is coherent or articulable.”

I fully embraced my own queerness and began studying Christian theology at around the same time, in 2014. I identify with queerness specifically, from the LGBTQ+ list, because I feel, like Bayo Akomolafe, that identity—my identity—is not necessarily coherent or articulable – it is otherwise, and ‘otherwise’ is what I mean by queerness. When I enter Christian spaces created especially for queer people, it becomes obvious to me that I am more comfortably ‘out’ about being queer than I am about the forms of faith I practice. There are people who preserve a wild space within the parameters of Christian identity, and I often feel that Quaker silent worship is such a wild space, though I have also experienced this in more traditional forms of Christianity. Rejection within my family on the basis of sexuality came from a very different interpretation of Christianity, similar to interpretations that historically gave moral justifications for the plundering of land and people and imaginations, bearing no minor responsibility for the ecological disasters we face now. And here, I would say it is important for Christians, including Quakers, to reckon with these histories, but that is not what I want to talk about now. Anyway, in the face of ecological threats, the most appropriate human responses are also the ones to which many of us are most resistant: grief, atonement, repair, humility—and, if we allow ourselves those, then also wonder, compassion, joy, gratitude, praise.

In my thirty-fifth year, in 2014, I had what I can only imprecisely describe as a conversion experience, not a new call to faith, but an identity-changing awakening to impending ecological disaster. This happened in the midst of significant personal upheaval, among which, the death of a life-long friend and the (not unexpected, but still devastating) rejection by a parent after I met the woman I would end up marrying. Falling in love, as much as losing loved ones, displaces, even annihilates, significant parts of the self. Maybe this is, as the theologian John Zizioulas has suggested, in order to make room for the other. In any case, this word—annihilation—best describes my preoccupation during that time. It is one thing to be informed about ocean acidification, accelerating rates of extinction, and another thing altogether to *know,* to metabolize the disaster within one's body, through which all experience is mediated. And it is important to emphasize this. As the systems theorist Joanna Macy has written, "All the threats facing us in this planet-time—be they toxic wastes, world hunger, or global warming—come down in the final analysis to threats to the body."

The catalyst for my awakening to ecological threat was a *Guardian* article about the text *Limit to Growth,* written by MIT researchers for an international think tank, in 1972. On 1 September, 2014, the headline read, "Four decades after the book was published, *Limit to Growth's* forecasts have been vindicated by new Australian research. Expect the early stages of global collapse to start appearing soon." More affecting than the article itself was a graph that showed the 1972 data lines for industrial output, global pollution, food per capita, non-renewable resources remaining, services per capita, and global population, and alongside them, that same data observed between 1970-2000, lines which matched the MIT researchers' figures nearly exactly. Every line takes a dramatic nosedive between 2025 and 2050.

Like all the newly converted, I spent months in states of hypersensitivity to my new reality, a wild-eyed, skinless alertness, intense incredulity at the unbelief of others, a relentless impulse to evangelize, accompanied by a kind of paranoia about a world that had conspired to withhold Big Truth from me. We didn't yet have the language of 'climate grief,' and now that we do, I don't know how helpful it is. It's only in a world-sense that imagines the earth and all of creation as separate from human kinship that *climate* grief becomes its own category. I knew somehow at the time that the deaths of friends and relationships and reckoning with queer identity and losing the earth were intertwining wildernesses, each grief deepening the others. Still, I held faithfully to one of the few assurances I have as a writer, that the splintering of the self can, with time, be re-collected in language. This is no mere metaphor; neuroscience has shown that not only is the brain plastic, the hippocampus, which is responsible for memories, regenerates quite rapidly. Moreover, the gut, sometimes referred to as the "second brain," does as much (if not more) of what we imagine the brain does: thinks, feels, builds blocks of behaviors that turn into moods, convictions, identities. And *those* cells regenerate every 2-9 days. We are made and remade, fearfully and wonderfully, and continuousy.

I had wanted to reframe loss—of family, of futures—by writing about the past, exploring Big Grief (having settled into it a little) through the lens of apocalyptic texts I was studying in 2014. Headlines such as "12 years to act to avert climate disaster," or, "12 years? More like 18

months" made me think it was a good moment to talk about apocalypses. Then in January of this year my 43-year old brother died suddenly and inexplicably of a heart attack. Exorbitant funerary transport costs meant that he was cremated before friends or family, thousands of miles away, could see him. I flew to the US at the end of January, and three weeks after I returned to Ireland, the entire world constricted with the pandemic. "I didn't get to say good-bye" ascended like a chorus of lament; my voice was just one of many. I'd like to tell you more about my brother, about the world that ended when he left the world, but that is for a different occasion. More recently, another *Guardian* headline read, "World has 6 months to avert climate crisis, says energy expert."

Here is where I find myself now: not only is apocalypse not a subject of the past, but much like grief, it does not conform to linear time or logical narrative. There is not a straight-forward way forward. Wherever you are hearing this, please do not forget that we are not in control, we do not know everything, and that our end—the end of all creatures—is still, always, continually unfolding.

In *The Apocalyptic Imagination,* John Collins describes apocalyptic writing (and I am paraphrasing) as *stories* about *divine revelation*, through *visions* or *otherworldly journeys*, imparting knowledge about *end times*, *final judgment*, and the establishing of *God's kingdom*.

The apocryphal book of Fourth Ezra is an apocalypse partially composed sometime after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The true author is unknown, but in the story, the Jewish scribe Ezra, exiled in Babylon sometime between the 6th-5th centuries B.C.E., pleads with God to help him understand why God allows evil in God's own creation. In response Ezra receives seven visions through the mediation of the angel Uriel. Again and again, Ezra demands quantitative, logical answers to many anxious, often angry questions that I, as a dual-US-EU citizen, can very much relate to:

Why is an evil empire allowed to continue to wreak havoc on those who honor their covenant with God?

When the angel responds that the current world will pass, Ezra's desperation deepens:

When will the new age come? How much time remains? (12 years? 18 months? 6 months?)

When and how will the end come? (Plague? Wars? Collapse of biodiversity and food systems? Fires and floods?)

Why do we have to wait and suffer through successive generations? Why did God not make all of creation at the same time and pass judgment immediately?

Is there more time behind us or ahead of us?

Will there be more who are damned than saved? Will I be alive in those days?

Why make the world only to destroy it?

I feel the question behind Ezra's question here: Why make us *as we are,* and then destroy us for being *as we are*?

The angel's responses are, shall we say, less than consoling:
"Lo, there are days coming when those who inhabit the earth shall be seized with great terror, and the way of truth shall be hidden, and the land shall be barren of faith... the land that you now see ruling shall be a trackless waste, and people shall see it desolate...and one shall reign whom those who inhabit the earth do not expect, and the birds shall fly away together; and the Dead Sea shall cast up fish; and one whom the many do not know shall make his voice heard by night, and all shall hear his voice. There shall be chaos also in many places, fire shall often break out, the wild animals shall roam beyond their haunts…" (5:1-8).

It is easy to ascribe the power of this text to the way it seems to predict THIS moment of terror, fake news, confusion, collapse of ecosystems, fires, displaced wildlife. With a little reflection, the text feels like an oracle in nearly all of its details. I am reminded of the ways the Black freedom movement in the US was born under the precarious cover of "hush harbors," as the religion of the enslaved; once heard only by night, the affirmation that Black Lives Matter is now heard by all.[1] But that oracular quality is just one source of its power. Another is its formal disregard of linear time. This text, remember, was written *after* the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., *as if* written in 6th c. B.C.E. past by the Jewish prophet (Ezra) who is predicting the destruction of Jerusalem *in the future*.

Why would such a genre exist? Much like authors of science fiction, the apocalyptic writers might have used time-bending narratives and revelation (rather than linear, rational arguments) as a strategy to hold the psyche intact, to imagine possibilities of life, and to create at least an illusion of control, during times of profound and widespread uncertainty, when logic and reason would predict only further ruin. For example, against the backdrop of settler-colonialist state destruction and denigration of Black and Indigenous life, there are genres of Afrofuturist and Indigenous futurist forms of art and literature that affirm that Black and Indigenous people exist and thrive in the future. It is a way of acknowledging, maybe as the apocalyptic writers of Fourth Ezra were doing, that, again, we are not in control, that we cannot know everything, and that there is power (even divine power) in the imagination.

There are a few key moments where the source of Ezra's authority is primarily his own human intellect, specifically, his rational, linear argument; however, revelation—the unveiling of all that he doesn't know—shatters his self-righteousness, making way for a more compassionate positioning within his own suffering. Later in the text, the angel commissions

[1] See for example, Rev. Eboni Marshall Turman's article "A Theological Statement From the Black Church on Juneteenth," in *Colorlines*, June 19, 2020, https://www.colorlines.com/articles/theological-statement-black-church-juneteenth

Ezra to write the story of the world, and, more importantly, instructs, “set your house in order, reprove your people, comfort the lowly among them, and instruct those that are wise” (14:13). The consolation is not a triumphalist hope that suffering won’t take place, but a call for Ezra first to mind himself and his own affairs, then to meet others where they are according to their capacity, rather than proselytizing about the end of the world. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in 2014 I was constitutionally changed by the deep wisdom of this text, which also helped *me* move from a position of (first grief-stricken, then self-righteous) alienation, toward a more participatory belonging in the world, even while acknowledging that the world I knew was, and is, dying.

I am not suggesting that scientific data is wrong, nor am I suggesting that a Biblical text provides answers that scientific research can’t. I am looking, instead, with a degree of suspicion at the ways we cling to certainties. Even the idea of the Anthropocene, the name some people have given to the age we live in – literally means, “The Age of Man”—emerged from a ‘Western’ ideological tradition. It names the calamitous human impact on the earth, but it relies on data sets, doomsday clocks, the pressures of evidence-based projections of the exact hour of our demise, this is always in binaries. In other words, we can only ever either ‘save’ or ‘lose’ the earth—and these either/or options are habits of thinking similar to those that have led to the disaster. Because to believe we can only fail, continuing on the trajectory we read in news headlines, denies the power of imagination, especially the imagination of the margins. But to believe only that we have to frantically search for solutions, and that, by doing so, we will save the world through sheer human will, denies the real need for grief for what has already been lost, and for what we may still lose. What if the truth is something humbler, stranger, and more otherwise?

A modified version of this text will appear in print in a book called *Words for a Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global Church*, edited by Hannah Malcolm, published by SCM Press in December 2020.