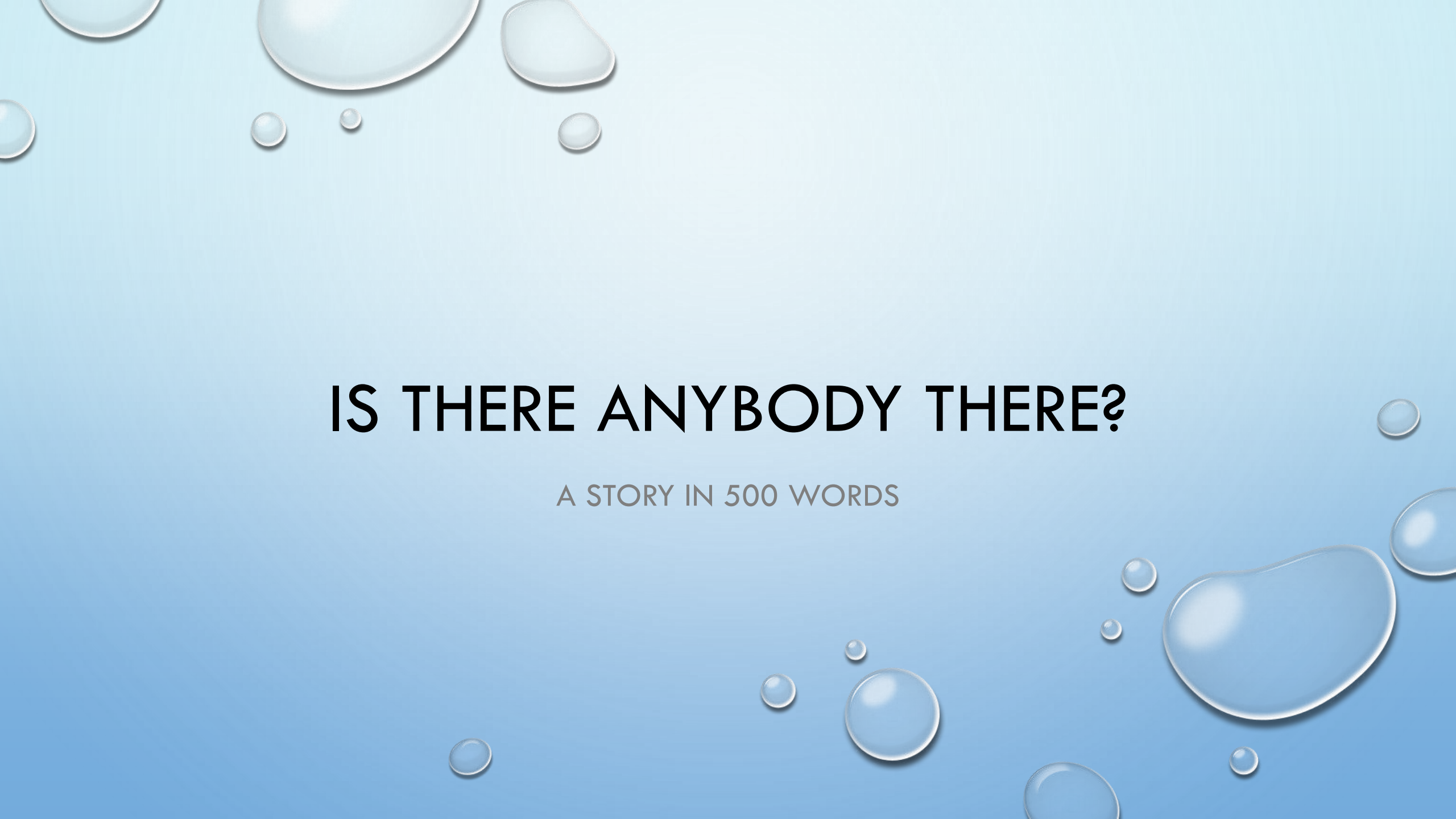


The background is a light blue gradient with several realistic water droplets of various sizes scattered across it. Some droplets are at the top, some at the bottom, and some in the middle. They have highlights and shadows, giving them a three-dimensional appearance.

IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

A STORY IN 500 WORDS

IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

Xena woke suddenly from a deep sleep.

Quickly, she checked the telesensor but the screen showed nothing: four hours of nothing!

She ran a diagnostic, a procedure she was carrying out more and frequently, but the readouts were normal.

Everything was functioning normally; Outside was just quiet.

Quieter than she had ever known.

IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

She should eat.

Today, she hoped, the HGP would be at full capacity.

Lately the HoloGraphicProcessor had been powering down and the choice was extremely limited.

Diagnostics of this system gave varying readouts but she had been unable to pinpoint the fault.

In the beginning, when the pod was new, the HGP had produced excellent rations – Outside rations reminiscent of food from the Before when there was land and sky and daylight and... ice.

During her last podcontact, Saxo claimed he had once versed with someone who had actually touched actual, real ice.



IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

“It is cold and sticky and slippery and painful,” he versed with authority in the voice that he always used around her.

He thought he was smarter than her because he had circuited for longer.

She didn’t believe even half of what he versed, how could something be slippery and sticky at the same time?



IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

Rousing her from her thoughts, the HGP opened to reveal... basic rations. Again!

She consumed the hard tack and desalinated water trying to remember that she was one of the lucky ones; she was alive, she had a functioning pod, she had encountered no hostiles for more than seven rest periods.

This last thought troubled her.

She checked the telesensor again.

Nothing!

Quiet.

Perhaps she should carry out a long-range scan.

IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

The long-range scan was not due until the next half circuit was complete but she could override the command-controls and force a scan if she thought there was a problem.

Was there a problem?

Or she could use the telecommunicator and try and call someone?

Anyone.

IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

But was this an emergency?

Was an absence of a problem, a problem in itself?

The telecommunicator was strictly forbidden except for emergencies.

Everyone knew that the wave frequency alerted the hostiles of your location.

During podcontacts she had heard stories.



IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

If she stayed on course she would podcontact with other survivors in forty-six hours.

Forty-six hours was not long to wait.

It would be better to wait.

Safer.



IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

In the Before, people had televersed all the time.

They had taken communication for granted.

They had taken everything for granted.

Now, when there was nothing left except pods and Undersea and Inside, it was hard to imagine how they could keep consuming and ignoring all the Evidence.

It was the Evidence that saved them in the end.

Some of them.



IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

Perhaps she would sleep again.

If there were anything in the Outside, the telesensor would alert her.

She checked the screen again.

She ran another diagnostic.

There was nothing there.

There was nothing wrong.

Forty-six hours was not long to wait.

She would feel better once she podcontacted.

She closed her eyes...

