

Living Hope!

Good morning church! We gather this first Sunday after Easter, continuing to celebrate the risen Christ. The lectionary points us toward a **hope passage** from 1 Peter. How appropriate is **that** given our current circumstances! Hope has become a precious commodity! – but what sort of hope are we hoping for, exactly?

In my chaplaincy work, I payed close attention to what hope looked like for the patient or family. What I observed was that our hopes shift as our circumstances change; it must adapt to our understanding of reality, and that the “death” of a hope can itself cause grief. We hope we won’t get sick. We really don’t want to get Covid 19, or our family! When we do get sick, the object of hope shifts to cure. We hope that our symptoms would be mild, and that there would be no lasting effects. Certainly, we would hope not to need hospitalization or intubation – being placed on a ventilator. We hope for cure, and, thankfully, it often happens, but not always.

When all available avenues of cure have been exhausted, our hope may shift to time – just a bit more time with those we love. When death is near, we often hope that suffering is short, and as pain free as possible. People’s hopes for the afterlife are all over the map: some hope that there is none! Other’s hope that they have been sufficiently good to go to heaven. Some hope to become stars or angels!

As a chaplain, I can’t “give” anyone hope. I can point to it, explain it, and even hold it for someone until they are able accept it for themselves. In times of crisis, we look for hope in all kinds of places and people. And right now, the search is on!

In a recent McLean’s article entitled “the Folly of Hope” Shannon Gormley writes: *We hoped for the best and did not prepare for the worst. We have new hopes now. We hope to be saved—but what will we sacrifice to get there?*

We hoped that something impossible would come to pass—we hoped the world would not face a pandemic. This was not our mistake. Impossible hope is not a mistake. It can lead to great things, after all, if not the thing that is hoped for. Our mistake was rather to behave as though the only possibility we would confront was the impossibility we hoped for.

We hope, too, that however our governments may save us, they will at no point be tempted to abuse, for their own purposes, the powers they avail themselves of in

the name of our salvation. This is a great hope, of course; experience tells us, also, that it is an impossible one. We should not again behave as though the impossibility we hope for is the only possibility we face.

Quite the disturbing statements on hope – we hope our government will **save us**, but we don't trust them with the powers they will need to do so. Hope during this pandemic is stuck between a rock and a hard place! I cannot imagine the anxiety I would feel if my impossible hope were contingent on politics and bureaucracy!

Is there not a hope for today and tomorrow that is less fragile, less contingent on changing realities? An impossible hope that is not folly? The apostle Peter would say an emphatic “YES!” Is it ever OK to put all your “*hope*” eggs in one basket? Yes, when they are *Easter eggs* – hope based on the reality of the bodily resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. This is the kind of living hope that Peter professes and proclaims. This is the kind of impossible hope the world needs.

Peter is writing to the churches scattered over what is now modern Turkey. These churches were facing persecution, discrimination, economic hardship, even death– all because of their faith. Peter writes in order to encourage them during this time – reminding them of the basis of their faith, their hope for the future, and how to act in response to their situation. No, we are not under threat of persecution and martyrdom, however, I do think that Peter's message of living hope does speak well to our time of heightened anxiety, fear, and awareness of death.

Our passage starts with doxology – “praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” “Doxology? Now?”, His first hearers must have thought – “when the church is under heavy fire??” Doxology now? we say - In a time of physical isolation, daily case counts and reports of new deaths? Now? When people are losing their jobs, businesses are shutting their doors, and savings have disappeared? Doxology, now?

As Richard V. shared in our men's group, the pandemic is a revealer – of the effectiveness of governments, of health care systems, of the frailty of humanity. It can also be a revealer of the content of the human heart. You see, the pandemic brings out that which has always been there – death and decay, rust and moth, uncertainty and instability, fear, mistrust – they have always been a part of this broken world, we are now more keenly aware of it. To me, this still feels like lent, even though we are on the resurrection side of the cross. But that's just it; are we

on the other side? We are not yet done with death, or are we? For Peter – Jesus' resurrection changed everything!

“Praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Jesus rose again! He who was crucified and once dead, has returned to life – resurrection life! And with new life – comes living hope! Christ has won the victory over our last great enemy – death!

Our statement of faith affirms Christ as Victor: *Since Christ destroyed the power of death by His resurrection, believers need not be afraid of death, the last enemy. Christ's followers go to be with the Lord when they die. When Christ returns, they will be raised and receive new bodies. Believers who are alive at Christ's coming will be transformed and will also receive new and glorious bodies, fit for life in God's eternal kingdom.*

Death does not have the last word; our last and greatest enemy has been defeated. If the Lord tarries, we will have to face death – but we do so knowing that we will rise again! That is reason for hope! Our impossible hope is not to become a bodiless spirit floating around on the clouds, eating Philadelphia creamed cheese, and playing harps - but resurrection of the body – perfect, glorified, whole!

Peter was a witness to the Lord in his new, transformed body – and he testifies to a resurrected Lord and Savior, and the power of God, through the Spirit, to bring new life. And our Lord is the first – the first fruits – of many who will follow! No wonder there is great expectation! No wonder there is doxology!

But it doesn't end there – re-creation extends well beyond our individual beings, to a renewal of all creation – what John describes in Revelation as the new heavens and new earth coming into being at the end of the age.

Our confession of faith describes it this way:

Sin, guilt, and death will not prevail. God will create a new heaven and a new earth in which there will be no evil, suffering, and death. The first signs of this new creation are already present in those who accept God's forgiveness through Christ. In Christ, all things are being reconciled and created anew.

N.T.Wright, in *Surprised by Hope* says, “The central Christian affirmation is that what the creator God has done in Jesus Christ, and supremely in his resurrection,

is what he intends to do for the whole of the world – meaning, by *world*, the entire cosmos with all its history.”(91) This salvation is waiting to be revealed - Peter reminds us - when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world!” No wonder Peter calls this a **priceless inheritance**, safely kept in the presence of God.

This inheritance – unlike what we hope to leave our kids – is secure – it does not fluctuate with the stock markets! It is not temporal, tarnished by time or subject to human meddling. Your inheritance, guaranteed by your heavenly father, is waiting for you. That, my friends, is another reason for hope! Salvation – the promise of new life in the new heaven and new earth – totally secure! **That’s Priceless!** For everything else, we are told, there’s Mastercard.

The result of all this, Peter says, is that we truly do have reason to be glad, or “greatly rejoice” – even if we are facing difficult times in the present. There is much to look forward to. This is by no means the end. Our current suffering is temporary, transitory – this too shall pass. **But our hope for the future shines bright!** As Huey Lewis sang in the 80’s- The future's so bright, I gotta wear shades!

Has Peter forgotten about the trials and tribulations of the churches of Asia Minor? Is he dull to their pain? I don’t think so. Peter is aware that there is more going on than what his hearers are focused on. Yes, these are challenging times. Yes, they can cause confidence in our living hope to falter – suffering can often be a challenge to faith. **But the sureness of our hope does not lie with us – it rests with God.**

For Peter, trials are testing – revealing the quality of our faith – and refining it – purifying and increasing its strength. Peter isn’t so much ignoring the immediate – he will get to that later in the letter; **he is taking the long view – gaining perspective.** Like the writer of Hebrews, who encourages his hearers to run the race of faith with endurance, or Paul reminding us of Jesus’ example – looking forward to joy – looking past the cross – to a glorious future, we too can look beyond the immediate to this living hope based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter does acknowledge the challenges of the present, reminding his hearers to “Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.” (5:7) Later he concludes by saying, “In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore,

support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation. All power to him forever! Amen. (5:10,11).

Remember, Peter new a thing or two about flagging faith in the wind and waves of life!

I am so thankful that we worship a god who is able to hold all things at once - both the big picture – the re-creation of the entire universe – and the detail – my own trials and tribulations – and I am only one of 7.8 billion people on the planet. Thanks be to God!

So, what difference does Jesus’s resurrection from the dead make for today – not just for eternity, but for time as well? Three things come to mind, which you already know, but a reminder never hurt! The first two are comforts, the final a challenge!

First, We are not alone. We have not been left alone, we are not orphans! The same Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead lives in us! Peter affirms through the letter that the same Spirit that brings us to the truth of the Gospel is one that gives life, empowers us for holy living, and is present, even in our suffering. Our confession of faith reminds us that:

The Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, is the creative power, presence, and wisdom of God. The Spirit convicts people of sin, gives them new life, and guides them into all truth. By the Spirit, believers are baptized into one body. The indwelling Spirit testifies that they are God’s children, distributes gifts for ministry, empowers for witness, and produces the fruit of righteousness. As Comforter, the Holy Spirit helps God’s children in their weakness, intercedes for them according to God’s will, and assures them of eternal life. We are not alone, for by His Spirit, God is with us!

Second. This life is not a waste of time. What we do here matters! New creation 2.0 is absolutely required because of the viruses of sin and death, but, as the scars on Jesus new glorified body show – all is not forgotten. Paul, at the end of his treatise on resurrection (1 Corinthians 15) says this: Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

N.T. Wright explains:

You are (strange though it may seem, and almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself) - You are accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness, every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led-teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrection power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God. God's re-creation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world. (208) What we do, matters.

Finally, a challenge: Practice Resurrection! Our Extended Table group came across this enigmatic phrase in our reading of Eugene Peterson's book, *Leap over a wall*. Peterson "borrows" the phrase from poet Wendell Berry, and employs it to describe Jesus' own actions and attitude prior to his death. Jesus "set out for Jerusalem knowing that a horrible death was being prepared for him. All the while he was doing that - he exhibited in word and presence a wonderful vitality, beauty, and faith. There were celebrations with hosannas, conversations full of hope and promise, painful confrontation, tender acts of sacrificial love. The imminence of death didn't cancel out the revelation of God in Jesus, but rather, gave it added poignancy and power." (Peterson, 228)

This present circumstance of pandemic should not shroud our ability, by God's grace and His Spirit, to reflect His glory to an anxious world. Practice Resurrection.

So, pay attention to God's re-creating work that is already under way. Look for signs of life, signs of faith, hope, and love! Plant seeds of generosity, kindness, and faithfulness. Cultivate the ability to be still, to listen for voice that gives praise to our loving Creator who continues to sustain all things and holds all things together. And, as Peter reminds us – always be ready to explain your Christian Hope if anyone asks. (1Peter 3:15)

Because we have such an incredible, living hope: Practice Resurrection. Amen.