

## **“Hope Does Not Disappoint Us”**

Date: August 23, 2012

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Romans 5:1-5; 1 Peter 1:3-6

Theme: Hope

Occasion: Virtues, series

Today we look at the Christian virtue of hope. It's opposite, of course, is hopelessness. Hopelessness can be fatal; let me give you an example of what I mean. Several years ago, in Russia, an employee of the railroad accidentally locked himself in a refrigerator car.

Unable to escape or attract attention so as to get some help, the man resigned himself to his fate. As he felt his body becoming numb, he took out a pencil from his pocket and recorded the story of his approaching death. He scribbled on the walls of the car, “I am becoming colder... still colder. Slowly freezing....half asleep. These may be my last words....”

When the railroad car was opened the man was found dead. But a peculiar thing was noticed. The temperature inside the car was only 56 degrees. The freezing mechanism was out of order and there was still plenty of air. So even though there was no physical reason for this man to die, he was a victim of his own hopelessness. He believed himself to death.

Hopelessness can be fatal. You don't have to be locked in a refrigerator car to feel that way. People who have been trapped in generations of poverty can feel hopeless. “Why bother? Why try?”

Folks who live with depression often report feeling hopeless. “Why go on living; what's the use?” Some people feel trapped in a marriage, a job or some other situation from which they feel there is no escape; and they report feeling hopeless.

Hopelessness can be fatal. People need to have hope. Easter Sunday is the rebirth of hope. Once dead, now alive, Jesus brings hope

back into the world. Clement of Alexandria, a first century Christian, once said, “Jesus Christ turns all of our sunsets into dawn.”

Hope is the belief that things will get better, that things CAN be better. Hope is the desire for a different future, a brighter future. Hope is the belief that God has a better future in store for each one of us – both in this life and the one to come. Jesus said, “I came that you might have life and life abundantly.”

Faith and hope are inextricably linked together. Faith, the deep abiding trust in God, is what undergirds our hope. “But pastor, how can I hold on to hope when it appears the world is going to hell in a hand-basket? How can I hold on to hope when there is so much suffering in the world? How can I hold on to hope when the situation looks so bleak?”

I’m glad you asked that question, because if we’re not careful it is all too easy to get caught up in what’s happening right in front of our eyes. But Paul is not naïve when he tells us to have hope. Listen again to what he says in Romans:

“We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us.” (Romans 5:2b-5a)

Peter, in his first letter echoes this sentiment. “Praise be to God! He has given us a new birth *into a living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Jump to verse 6, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” (1 Peter 1:3, 6) Do you hear that? We experience a living hope, knowing that these trials are not the last word. God has something else to offer us.

I like the way Frederick Buechner put it. Adam Hamilton quotes him

in every one of his Easter Sunday sermons. Buechner says, ““The *worst* isn't the *last thing* about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even. Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well.” — Frederick Buechner, [The Final Beast](#)

You see my friends, we don't hope in the things of this world. We put our faith and our hope in God, who has even more in store for us. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the sign of hope that all of God's promises will be vindicated.

In the resurrected Christ, we know that the power of the old age is doomed and the new creation is already appearing. This has special meaning when we think about such things as sorrow, disappointment, pain and suffering. “The worst thing is never the last thing; it is always the next to the last thing.”

Now, we make a serious mistake when we identify optimism with hope. They are often confused but they are not the same. Optimism is the belief or the trust that things will eventually get better. Optimism is believing in your own self, or believing in the progress of humanity, or believing in social evolution – hoping things are moving in a better direction.

Hope is altogether different. Hope puts trust not in oneself or in the progress of the human race, but instead puts all of its trust in God. Hope is the confidence that God is alive and sovereign. We trust, in ways we may not understand, that God is at work in the world, and one day God will establish God's kingdom.

The condition of the world offers no cause for optimism. The reality and power of God offers us every reason for hope. But because the world gives us no sign of hope, there is no excuse for Christians to sit back, fold their arms and do nothing, either accepting what happens as fate, or simply waiting until God shows up to make everything wonderful.

If we believe and trust God enough to pray, “Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” then we must order our lives, establish our priorities and use as resources as if the Kingdom had come. In that way, we point to the new reality which God is bringing about.

We approximate in this earthly order that which already exists in the heavenly realm. We practice what someone has designated “the ethics of hope.” Our presence, our ministries will be signs, however limited, of hope. We will be witnesses to the coming Reign of God, a kingdom that we do not bring, but is the will and work of God.

When we practice the ethics of hope, we become messengers of hope to those who may be experiencing it right now. We hold food drives and work at Produce Express and the Millcreek Food Pantry, to assist those who are in need, offering them the hope of God. We walk or donate to the CROP Walk to help provide food and needed assistance to others around the world – offering them the hope of God.

When you take the day off of work to sit and be with a friend who just lost her mother, you are a messenger of hope. You remind her that she is not alone. Your presence is a ministry, and brings hope. When you offer to babysit so that a mother on welfare can go back to work – you are a messenger of hope.

Satan would have us believe that the world is in terrible shape and nothing can be done about it. But every time an act of kindness or a deed

of charity is performed, Easter is validated. The victory over sin and death is ours to share with the world. Christ is risen and he lives in us.

To live in the power of the resurrection and eternity is to lose our fear of death, and to trust God to save us, now and forever. *This* is Christian hope. We hope not in ourselves, but in the power of Almighty God.

I'd like to close by reading another passage from Paul's letter to the Romans (8:18, 22-25)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the future glory that awaits us. Here is the basis of Christian hope. God is not yet finished. The worst that can happen is not the last thing to happen. The final word belongs to God and therein lays our hope.

May we believe it! May we trust it! Amen.

**Let us pray:** O God, give us strength to face what lies ahead, and hope to sustain us. We may not know where we are headed, but we know that you are with us wherever we go. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen." (Romans 15:13)

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Workbook on Virtues and the Fruit of the Spirit*, by Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998, pp. 91-97.