

2008 Resurrection Sunday

A Living Hope

1 Peter 1:3

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March 23, 2008

A Living Hope

Scripture

Easter is the greatest celebration of the Christian Church.

But what does the word “Easter” mean? Where and when was it first celebrated?

The origin of the word “Easter” is uncertain, but the Venerable Bede claimed that the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ displaced ancient pagan celebrations involving the Anglo-Saxon spring goddess “Eostre.” That, he said, occasioned the term.

Others believe the word derives from an old German term meaning “sunrise.”

Whatever its meaning, it is the oldest celebration of the Christian Church.

A custom arose among the Early Church worshipers to keep watch on the Saturday night preceding Easter Sunday morning as many believed that Christ would return at the dawn of this day.

Another custom among new converts in the Early Church had them keeping watch and praying throughout Saturday night, and then they were baptized at sunrise on Easter Sunday morning.

And yet another custom, still widely practiced today, finds the pastor addressing the congregation on Easter Sunday morning with the glorious words: “He is risen!”

The congregation shouts in return: “He is risen indeed!”

For 2,000 years the foundation of Christianity has rested securely on this simple yet unfathomable truth: Jesus is alive!¹

And the resurrection of Jesus Christ has given rise to a living hope for those who believe it. Let me draw your attention to 1 Peter 1:3, where we read these wonderful words from one of Jesus’ own apostles, who was an eye-witness of Jesus’ resurrection:

¹ Robert J. Morgan, *On This Day: 365 Amazing and Inspiring Stories About Saints, Martyrs & Heroes*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000, c1997), March 21.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

Introduction

Surely no apostle felt the death of Jesus more agonizingly than Peter.

He had boasted that he would not leave him nor forsake him. He had bragged that he would stay true and fight for him even unto death.

Peter meant so well, but he failed so miserably.

When the moment came, a little girl's question upset him, melted all his bravado, and he denied that he even knew Jesus.

All the apostles experienced the loss of hope when Jesus died. But Peter experienced additional shame and disgrace because of his denial of even knowing Jesus.

I believe that it is likely that there are some here this morning whose hopes have been crushed, whose dreams have been unfulfilled. Maybe just a few years ago you had glorious dreams of what you would like to be, and what you would like to do, and now they are all faded away, or collapsed about you. You meant to do well, but things ended up wrong, somehow.

But it is just that kind of loss of hope and disappointment that the resurrection of Jesus is designed to relieve.

Have you ever thought of it this way?

We celebrate Easter and the great triumph of Christ over the grave—and it is a great triumph—but I think we often forget that Easter also stands for the presence of Christ with us to meet the pressures of life as they come to us day by day.

I am sure Peter had that in mind when he wrote today's text.

Jesus understood how Peter felt in the hour of his monumental failure and collapse of faith, and he sought him out, appeared to him, and reconciled Peter to himself.

You remember that Jesus appeared to the disciples on the shores of Galilee after his resurrection. He prepared a meal for them on a fire, and called them to come and join him.

Then Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me, Peter?”

Three times Peter affirmed his love.

And three times Jesus gave him something to do, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15-18).

That was an enormous encouragement to Peter. Surely that was on the forefront of Peter’s mind when he wrote, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”**

Lesson

Now, I want to bring us into the present. I want you to see that if Christianity is true at all, then Jesus is just as much able to meet us today and help us in the face of discouragement and hopelessness as he was in the first century.

If Jesus is not able to do so, then Christianity is a fraud, and we might as well pack it in and go home right now.

But, I want you to see that Jesus is doing exactly the same thing today as he did 2,000 years ago: he gives us a living hope in the face of discouragement and hopelessness.

I. We Do Not Have an Uncertain Hope

First, we do not have an uncertain hope.

Author Philip Yancey describes a unique funeral custom conducted by some African Muslims. Close family and friends circle the casket and quietly gaze at the corpse. There is no singing, no flowers, and no tears.

A peppermint candy is passed to everyone. At a certain signal, each one puts the candy in his or her mouth. When the candy is gone, each participant is reminded that life for this person is

over. They believe life, like a peppermint, simply dissolves.²

Isn't this a hopeless view of life?

When I mentioned this custom to my daughter who is in college, she asked wryly, "What did they do before peppermints?"

The apostle Peter wrote this letter to Christians who were facing persecution, difficulties, and death because of their faith.

He exhorted them to stand strong, repeatedly reminding them of Christ's example, and probably mindful of his own failure.

Peter, who is also called "the apostle of hope," encouraged them to trust in Jesus, live obediently in hard circumstances, and keep their hope fixed on God's ultimate purpose of deliverance.

When Jerome Groopman diagnosed patients with serious diseases, the Harvard Medical School professor discovered that all of them were "looking for a sense of genuine hope—and indeed, that hope was as important to them as anything he might prescribe as a physician."

After writing a book called *The Anatomy of Hope*, Groopman was asked for his definition of hope. He replied: "Basically, I think hope is the ability to see a path to the future. You are facing dire circumstances, and you need to know everything that's blocking or threatening you. And then you see a path, or a potential path, to get to where you want to be. Once you see that, there's a tremendous emotional uplift that occurs."

The doctor confessed, "I think hope has been, is, and always will be the heart of medicine and healing. We could not live without hope." Even with all the medical technology available to us now, "we still come back to this profound human need to believe that there is a possibility to reach a future that is better than the one in the present."³

In our day "hope" is a rather weak word. One dictionary defines it as "desire with expectation of obtainment."⁴ And it lists

² Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), n.p.

³ Rachel K. Sobel, "The Mysteries of Hope and Healing," *U.S. News and World Report* (1-26-04).

⁴ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Includes Index., Eleventh ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

“trust” and “reliance” as synonyms.

But we usually mean much less than this. We speak of “hoping against hope” or “hoping for the best,” which implies that we are not very hopeful.

But this is not what “hope” means in the Bible, and even the dictionary definition falls short of it.

In the Bible, “hope” means “certainty,” and the only reason it is called “hope” rather than “certainty” is that we do not *yet* possess it, although we surely will.

“Hope” here in this passage does not imply a wishfulness but rather a dynamic confidence that does not end with this life but continues throughout eternity.

“Hope is one of the theological virtues,” C. S. Lewis said. “This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”⁵

Friends, there are many people who have an uncertain hope for the future. They do not have a clear path to where they need to be. They do not have a certainty about what the future holds.

However, for those of us who believe in Jesus and in his resurrection, we do not have an uncertain hope.

⁵ Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen and H. Wayne House, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), comment on 1 Peter 1:3.

II. We Have a Certain Hope

Rather, we have a certain hope.

The Scripture assures us that we can face the future, especially death, with the promise of three great truths.

First, we are given the assurance that we will not be alone. There will be a divine companion with us; a hand will steady us through this time. Jesus said, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b).

We have that promise, whether we feel it or not, that we will not be left alone. Jesus said to his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18).

Over and over we have this promise repeated in the Word, that Christ will be with us always, especially in the hour of death.

Many of those who have died have borne testimony to that fact. When D. L. Moody was dying, his last words were, “Earth is receding, heaven is approaching; this is my crowning day.”

Second, we need have no fear about death. Christ promises us that there is no ground for fear. I have been struck by the fact that in the Word of God there are 365 places where it says, “Fear not.” And the reason is, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b).

Jesus said to his own disciples, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:1-3). Those are strong words, and great assurance in the hour of death.

There are many passages in the Word of God that assure us of the promise of a greater future beyond death. There are passages that describe the glory to come, and picture for us the beauty of life beyond as a great and marvelous experience where we will be more alive than we ever were here. Paul says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with

the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

“Well,” somebody says, “how do you know that is going to happen? Those are beautiful words, but do you have any proof?”

The answer, of course, is the event that we celebrate at Easter. That is the proof. Jesus Christ came back to life and rose from the grave and gave us an answer.

Now, it is clear that Jesus was dead. I do not think we need to debate that, though some have tried to question it.

When the Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear, John’s Gospel tells us, “blood and water” came out (John 19:34). That indicates that his blood had stopped circulating. He had been dead for some time, thus allowing the plasma and red corpuscles to separate so as to give the appearance of blood and water.

Then he was taken down from the cross. His body was wrapped all around in grave clothes that he could not move, and a wrapping was bound around his head—as in the oriental style of burial—so tightly that it would have been impossible for him to breathe. He was laid in a tomb and sealed in with a rock, and left there for three days and three nights.

So there is no question about Jesus being dead.

And yet from that death he came back to life!

When Jesus Christ came back to life again, he came back the same, but different. He identified himself to his disciples so that they had no doubt that it was Jesus. Thomas was invited to put his hands in the wounds and see that it was the same body that was crucified, and yet it was not the same. There was a difference. Jesus had a glorified body. He was living in a different dimension of life. Jesus came back to life in a resurrected body.

He came back, not merely having resisted death and recovered from it. He came back having conquered death. He is the master of death. This, therefore, is the guarantee upon which our hope rests as we must face, one of these days, our own death.

And third, Christians are promised a greater ability to function in life. Peter speaks of this as “**a living hope,**” and *living* means it is something that comes to us every day; it is something

that is available all the time.

It is in that sense that I want to show you that Jesus Christ, alive from the dead, is the answer to all the broken dreams, the collapsed hopes of your life and mine, the pressures that we feel from day to day, the sense of our failure, and the inability to perform as we would like to perform.

In the New Testament you can see how these early Christians were filled with a constant sense of the presence of Jesus with them. Everywhere they went they did so with joy and optimism and expectation. When you read the book of Acts you see that from beginning to end it has a ring of triumph.

There is a book called *The Empty Tomb*, and it is the (imaginary) letters of Caiaphas, the High Priest, to Annas, his father-in-law, describing his reaction to the resurrection of Jesus. This is an imaginary account, but it captures something of the surprise that the High Priest must have felt as he observed the behavior of those early Christians:

How they could one day plan and carry through a gigantic hoax, and the next day be themselves taken in by it, is another thing that utterly defeats my understanding. But that is what happened, and it changed them almost out of recognition. You could practically see them becoming new men before your eyes. Instead of the frightened, dispirited, weak creatures they were on the day of their leader's crucifixion, they were all at once transformed men of boldness, confidence and strength. Instead of being in terror of us as they had been, they did not seem to care a rap for any threat we made or even for any action we took. They openly paraded their false doctrine in the very streets of the city and deliberately flouted our every effort to silence them. And still the perplexities continue to pile up.⁶

There is no explanation of this strange behavior on the part of the disciples—other than the fact that Jesus was risen and he was with them. Nobody could see him but he was there, and he was

⁶ Source unknown.

strengthening them, helping them, and ministering to them.

You can take these three promises—the promise of his companionship, the promise of an absence of fear, and the promise of a greater ability to function—and you can apply them to every single hour of life, if you know Jesus Christ.

Now that is the great good news of Easter! You are not left alone to face the problems of life without help.

I know a man who said, “My marriage was about over and my wife and I were on the verge of divorce. I had given up all hope and didn’t want to live anymore. Then I met Jesus. I came to believe in Christ and in his resurrection.”

Then, looking me in the eye, he said, “And he has given me a new reason to live.”

Now, *that* is the resurrected Christ at work.

Conclusion

I call attention to the gateway by which this experience comes to us. How do you find Christ like that?

Peter’s answer is, “**According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope. . . .**”

To be born again is the “new birth.” Those are familiar words to some but not to others.

Chuck Colson has been born again; Jimmy Carter has been born again. But what does it mean?

It simply means there came a time when they recognized their sin and their failure. They cried out to Jesus for forgiveness and for a new start in life. God completely transformed them and made them new creatures in Christ Jesus. And the words of Peter became true in their experience: “**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.**”

Singer Johnny Cash once said, “A few years ago I was hooked on drugs. I dreaded to wake up in the morning. There was

no joy, peace, or happiness in my life. Then one day in my helplessness I turned my life completely over to God. Now I can't wait to get up in the morning to study my Bible. Sometimes the words out of the Scriptures leap into my heart. This does not mean that all my problems have been solved or that I've reached any state of perfection. However, my life has been turned around. I have been born again."

One of the men very influential in the conversion of Charles Colson was Tom Phillips, president of Raytheon Corporation. He said, "One night I was in New York on business and noticed that Billy Graham was having a crusade in Madison Square Garden. I went, curious, I guess, hoping maybe I'd find some answers. What Graham said that night put it all in place for me. I saw what had been missing in my life—the personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the fact that I have never asked him into my life and had never turned my life over to him. So I did it that very night at the crusade, and I was born again."

Now, those are living, up-to-date testimonials of men who have found the truth of this 2,000 year old document to be the same today.

Jesus Christ is alive!

He is ready to meet us in the hour of death, but more than that, he is ready to meet us in the pressures of life.

If you do not know him, you are going to have to struggle all through the weary days and weeks and months and years that lie ahead, doing the same old thing—hoping, and finding your hopes dashed, trying to be sincere, and finding it all come apart.

Or, you can put your life into the hands of the only One who is capable of handling it.

You can do that in a moment. All you need to do is recognize that are a sinner in need of a Savior. And you need to ask Jesus to be the Savior for your sin.

Do that now, and you too can experience a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father in heaven, thank you for raising Jesus from the dead.

We thank you for causing us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Friend, if you are here today and you do not yet have a living hope but want a living hope, pray with me:

O Lord, I want to have a living hope. I want to be born again. I know that I am a sinner and that I deserve to go to hell for all eternity. I repent of all my wrongdoing and sin. I turn from all of my sin. I want to start a new life. Please forgive me for all of my sin today. I believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for all my sin. I believe that he rose again from the dead, and will forgive me because I am asking him to do so today.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you would like to talk about what it means to be a Christian today, please speak to me following the service. I have a little booklet that I would like to give you. It is called *Which Way to God?* And it describes how you can be sure that you are a Christian.

CHARGE:

If you would like to talk about what it means to be a Christian today, please speak to me following the service. I have a little booklet that I would like to give you. It is called *Which Way to God?* And it describes how you can be sure that you are a Christian.

And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.