



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - April 23, 2008 A Living Hope
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Job 19:25-27

²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer^b lives,
and that at the last he^c will stand upon the earth;^d
²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in^e my flesh I shall see God,^f
²⁷ whom I shall see on my side,^g
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

Matthew 28:1-10

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Mk 16.1—8; Lk 24.1—12; Jn 20.1—10)

28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^a lay.⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead,^b and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.”⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with awe and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

1 Peter 1:3-9

A Living Hope

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope

^b Or *Vindicator*

^c Or *that he the Last*

^d Heb *dust*

^e Or *without*

^f Meaning of Heb of this verse uncertain

^g Or *for myself*

^a Other ancient authorities read *the Lord*

^b Other ancient authorities lack *from the dead*

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁶ In this you rejoice,^a even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.⁸ Although you have not seen^b him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Miss Ruby Eldredge is the pastor of the Pure Word Deliverance Church of God in the desperately poor neighborhood of Eight Mile, Alabama. Many of you have met her here or on OG or YG mission trips. Miss Ruby has lived an exceptionally hard 75 years, suffering through the crack addiction of a daughter, the abusive scarring of a grandson, and too many deaths to count among the crack addicts who make up her little congregation. And yet, she is also one of the most contagiously hopeful Christians I have ever met.

I asked her once how she was doing, and she replied, beaming, and without a second's hesitation – “Blessed and highly favored, on my way to heaven and enjoying the ride.” Her reply was as exceptional as it was plainly genuine.

Did you ever wonder where hope like that comes from? Hope in the midst of privation? That's what I want to explore together in this Easter message; and I want to begin by telling some journey stories.

Two young men journeyed home from the Civil War. Each had survived the rigors of war; each would arrive home safely. But how different, how infinitely different their journeys home must have been. Every journey is inevitably framed by where you're coming from and where you're going to, and the points of origin and

^a Or *Rejoice in this*

^b Other ancient authorities read *known*

destination of these two men could not have been more different.

My mother's great-grandfather was heading home after serving in the Confederate Army's 53rd Georgia Infantry Regiment. Wounded and captured at the Battle of Knoxville, imprisoned as a POW at Camp Chase, Ohio, he was coming *from* shattering defeat, and he was going *to* a sorrowing, devastated homeland.

My father's great-grandfather was heading home after serving in the Union Army's 1st New Mexico Volunteers. He was coming *from* victory, and he was going *to* a celebrating, prosperous homeland.

How different their journeys home must have been. I presume they each experienced the random fortunes of the open road, but, when you are traveling from victory to celebration, hope heightens every joy and leavens every lament. On the other hand, when you are traveling from defeat to sorrow, despair sours every joy and sharpens every lament. Every journey is inevitably framed by where you're coming from and where you're going to.

Two young Mary's journeyed to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. In fact they would find themselves traveling twice that day: the doleful walk to check on the tomb and the exultant sprint to tell the disciples of the resurrection. Each journey offered the same random fortunes of the road. But how different, how infinitely different their two journeys must have been, for the points of origin and destination of their two trips could not have been more different.

The two women had set out for the tomb in the pre-dawn dark, clutching their rough hewn robes against the morning chill, their leaden steps haunted by images of their beloved Jesus dying on a cross. They were coming from a shattering defeat, and they were going to a tomb that sealed the death of their savior and their hopes.

And then . . . and then Easter happened. An earthshaking tremor, a shimmering vision, an empty tomb, a risen savior, and the words that still set every soul on a road to new life: "Do not be afraid; he is not here . . . he has been raised." As the rising sun chased the shadows before them, the two women

dashed off to share the good news. They were now coming *from* God's ultimate victory, and they were now going *to* celebrate the good news with their friends. They had been trudging from life to tomb, but now they were dancing from tomb to life. And that made all the difference.¹

These journey stories carry the first of three Easter lessons. The first lesson is that our experience of life's journey will inevitably be framed by how we understand where we're coming from and where we're going to. And if that were the whole of it, if that were the whole of the Easter message, you would rightly screw up your faces and ask, "But preacher man, where is the good news in that?"

"When I reflect on my life honestly, it seems like I am coming *from* ambiguity and going *to* my demise. I am only too aware that my past accomplishments have been mixed with failures, and my past virtues stained by shortcomings. And, oh by the way, I've skipped ahead enough chapters to see that, sooner or later, every human life leads to infirmity and death. So, it seems, preacher man, that my life journey will include a fair amount of regret about my past and despair about my future. Just how is this first Easter lesson good news for me?"

Where's the good news?² The good news, my friends, comes with the second Easter lesson. The good news is that, when Jesus walked out of that tomb, God blessed to you a whole new origin and a whole new destination – a glorious origin that predates your birth and a hope-inspiring destination after you pass through death. At its most fundamental level, the resurrection means that God will have the last word over death, both Christ's death and your death.² And just because that is so, you and I may trust, you and I may hope that we are coming from Christ's resurrection and going to God's ultimate embrace. We are coming from God's victory over death and we are going to God's celebration of reunion. We are no longer trudging despairingly from life to tomb; we are now dancing hopefully from tomb to life. And that makes all the difference.

That difference has something to do with what God did two thousand years ago; and that difference has something to do with what God will do at the end of the age. But the difference on the table this morning, the difference I want to emphasize this Easter Sunday,

has to do with how we experience the journey itself, with how we may live right now. As Phillips Brooks wrote, “the great Easter truth is not that we are to live newly after death – that is not the great thing, but that we are to be new here and now by the power of the resurrection; not so much that we are to live forever as that we are to and may, live nobly now because we are to live forever.”³

The great Easter truth is that we may live nobly now because our hope has been assured. Theologians teach that Christian hope rests on a fundamental understanding that God may be trusted with our futures because God has proven trustworthy in the past; that having conquered the power of death for Jesus, God can be trusted to conquer the power of death for us.

Certainly, that was the great Easter truth emphasized by Saint Peter when he wrote “God . . . has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, . . . kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3, 4).

“Living hope” – that’s the key phrase this morning. Not just an historic hope that someday we’ll unearth physical proof of the resurrection. Not just a future hope that on the last day we’ll be tendered a “Get out of Death” card. Living hope. Because we are coming from Christ’s resurrection in our past, because we are going to our imperishable inheritance in heaven, just so we may live hopefully, joyfully, courageously through both the blessings and the privations of our earthly existence.⁴

After theologian Gary Habermas’ wife died, he wrote, “I knew that if God were to come to me, I would ask only one question: ‘Lord, why is Debbie up there in bed?’ I think God would respond by asking gently, ‘Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?’ I would say, ‘Come on, Lord, I have written seven books on the topic! Of course he was raised from the dead. But I want to know about Debbie!’ I think he would keep coming back to the same question, ‘Did I raise my son from the dead?’ until I got his point: The Resurrection says that if Jesus was raised, Debbie was raised. And I will be some day too. Then I will see them both.”⁵

A new point of origin and a new destination. Living hope. That’s the second Easter lesson.

The third Easter lesson hands life’s itinerary back to you, for only you can decide how to understand where you’re coming from and where you’re going to. Are you coming from ambiguity and going to demise or are you coming from resurrection and going to reunion? Are you trudging from life to tomb or dancing from tomb to life?

As I see it, there are only so many ways to answer the question. Let me briefly rehearse three of the most common.

First, there’s the atheist’s answer. The atheist professes to know with certainty that there is no God, no purposeful point of origin and no meaningful destination – though how the atheist knows these things with certainty requires a greater leap of faith than any saint’s.

The atheist knows she will face her death stripped of comfort, but she figures a lifetime of presumed philosophical integrity is worth a few bad moments at the end. Her strategy might be adequate if the sting of death occurred only at the end of life, if death simply intruded at the last minute like a pair of scissors cutting our thread of life. But the darkness of the grave casts its shadow back over the whole of our lives. That’s why Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews says Christ comes to “deliver them who through the fear of death were *all their lifetime* subject to bondage” (2:14-18). Having stripped away meaningful origins and destinations, the atheist has stripped away every foundation of a living hope. When she looks up to the heavens in despair she sees only darkness and hears only silence.

Second, there’s the procrastinator’s answer. The procrastinator doesn’t doubt Christian proclamation; he might even be a fine member of his local church. It’s just that the question of the resurrection makes his head hurt; he’d rather not think about it today. He sits in church on Easter Sunday nodding his head. “Yep, this resurrection thing sure is going to get relevant when I die. I really ought to figure out what I believe before then.”

The procrastinator is kind of like Homer Simpson. When Homer’s daughter Lisa asks him why he’s leading such a faithless existence, Homer reassures her, “Don’t

worry sweetheart. If I'm wrong, I'll recant on my deathbed. Always have a backup plan."

If you were hoping for a more respectable representative of the procrastinator position, you might consider Emperor Constantine's fourth-century approach to baptism. The way Emperor Constantine figured it, baptism guaranteed him forgiveness for his sins and certain entry into heaven. But, if he got himself baptized too early and then sinned again before he died, he might blow his heavenly guarantee. So Constantine kept putting his baptism off, keeping a priest close at hand, just in case he suddenly needed him. Sure enough, when Constantine was laid out on his deathbed, he got himself baptized just before he died.

The procrastinator's deathbed embrace of faith might gain him a heavenly reward. After all, it worked for the thief on the cross. What the procrastinator loses, however, is a lifetime foundation for a living hope. The procrastinator loses Phillips Brooks' ability "to live nobly now because we are to live forever."

Third, there's the answer many of us give – at least some of the time. It's a technically Christian but a functionally atheist answer. We profess Christianity and, if we were asked, we would sincerely claim a living hope in our risen Lord. It's just that our demeanor and actions too often betray us, for we exhibit less of the love, less of the freedom, less of the peace than true hope should inspire. Rather, like nonbelievers anxious for their destinies, we too often value accomplishments over relationships, security over sacrificial love, and perfectionism over trust in God.

We are too often like the community of ducks in Søren Kierkegaard's parable. The congregation of ducks waddled into a duck church to hear a duck preacher. The duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given ducks wings with which to fly. With those wings there was nowhere the ducks could not go; with those wings they could soar to reunion with God himself. At the conclusion of the service, the ducks left, commenting on what a wonderful message they had heard – and waddled back home.

Well, my fellow ducks, Easter is the day that reminds us we have wings. Easter is the day we gather in our

churches searching for the better answer to the question about our personal itineraries. Yes, we gather because we love the Easter lilies, and we love the Easter music, and we love the Easter story, and we love the Easter proclamation. But behind and under those fancies we bring the deepest of human hungers, the hunger for a living hope: a living hope that might sustain us both over the sunny ridge lines *and* through the shadowed valleys; a living hope that we are coming from love and going to love; a living hope that would free us to fly, not to waddle but to fly into our futures.

And the answer of the lilies is, our souls are seeded with a new life that no wintry death can repress. And the answer of the music is, "Made like him, like him we rise." And the answer of the story is, we may *all* be "blessed and highly favored, on our way to heaven and enjoying the ride." And all of this is so just because the Easter proclamation is true – "Alleluia, Alleluia, He is risen! He is risen indeed!" **Amen.**

1 "Used theologically," writes Andrew D. Lester, "the word *hope* describes a person's trusting anticipation of the future based on an understanding of a God who is trustworthy and who calls us into an open-ended future. This God keeps promises of deliverance, liberation, and salvation." Lester points out that the hoping process works through "narrative structuring": we learn to hope, that is, by means of stories, in which we situate our potential futures. Identifying two broad categories of hope, "finite" and "transfinite," Lester suggests that the latter grounds the former, gives it real meaning. "Hope gives us the confidence that working toward . . . finite goals is meaningful because this finite hope is rooted in transfinite hope. Transfinite hope inspires and motivates because it acknowledges a future that goes beyond our finite vision." See Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), pp. 62-7. In terms of such "narrative structuring," Miroslav Volf remarks: "In remembering Christ's death and resurrection, we remember what will happen to us, to our community, the world over. Memories of the Exodus and the Passion are intrinsically memories of the future." See *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 101.

2 Karl Barth puts the power of Easter in these terms: "[Christ] gives us—and this is the power of His direction—the freedom to rejoice as we arrive at our end and limit. For He is there. He lives there the life which as eternal life includes our own. He is our hope. And He bids and makes us hope." Again, "We act as though the work and Word of God were nothing; as though Jesus were not risen. . . . The

life of man becomes an unbroken chain of movements dictated by his anxious desire for assurances.” See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2, trans. G.W. Bromiley and ed. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 468, 469.

3 Phillips Brooks, “Easter Day,” *Sermons for the Principal Feasts and Fasts of the Church Year* (E.P. Dutton and Co., 1895).

4 Again, Miroslav Volf highlights the importance of knowing this “coming from”: “In the Eucharistic feast we remember each other as those who are reconciled to God and to each other. Our past, marked by enmity, has given way to a future marked by love. By remembering Christ’s Passion, we remember ourselves as what we *shall be* – members of one communion of love, comprised of wrongdoers and the wronged. The Passion memory is a hopeful memory since it anticipates deliverance from wrong suffered, freedom from the power of evil, and reconciliation between the wronged and wrongdoers – for the most part, a reconciliation between people who have both suffered wrong and inflicted it. The midday darkness of Good Friday that is our sins, sufferings, and enmity will be overcome by the new light of Easter morning that is our rejoicing in each other in the presence of God.” See *The End of Memory*, pp. 119-20.

5 Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 241-242. See also Douglas F. Ottati, *Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999).