

"People Get Ready"

April 19, 2020
Second Sunday of Easter
1 Peter 1:3-9

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts

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 through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 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. Although you have not seen 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, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Good Morning!

It is good to see you this morning or should, I say “to be seen” by you as we’re gathered virtually for worship in the season of Easter.

Last week, many of you checked in for Sunday Worship at 10:00 or for Sunrise Worship at 6:30, and in both services- you saw the flower-covered cross outside our building proclaiming “Christ is Risen: He is Risen, indeed!”

In so many churches across America, preachers were preaching the power of the Resurrection in the face of the fear over the Coronavirus and the economic uncertainty that has followed in its wake. In 1 John 4, Scripture states that “God is love” and that “Perfect love casts out fear.”

As Christians, we find that “perfect love” revealed in Jesus, and we stand fast in him, firm in our trust that he is present and alive with us in all things, and because of that, we do not labor in vain.

I think of all the nurses, chaplains, doctors, First Responders and other public servants on the front line of this battle, living with life and death each day that they go to work. The toll on their spirits-let alone their chance of getting the virus themselves-is tremendous. These people are living in a war zone. Where do they find the strength to persevere when so many are dying?

This is why we must labor in prayer, you and I: for strength and for solace; endurance and at the end of each day-peace-for those who are serving us so heroically. For truly their labors-and our prayers-will not be in vain.

What's urgently needed in times like these is HOPE: that "sure and certain hope" that rests not in our limited abilities to deal with life but in God's unlimited power to bring light into darkness and life out of death. This is what Easter People stand fast in and this is our subject for today.

In our text from 1 Peter, written in a time when believers were facing fears and troubles far worse than our own brought on by the Roman persecution of the Apostolic church, it is Peter speaking through Silas, a companion of Paul's, who is addressing the church of Asia Minor with a letter of encouragement, and this is what they say:

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 through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead....

It is that "living hope" that I want to explore with you today.

Hope is a little but hard to define: is it a feeling, or a conviction? Something you're sure of; or something more like "a wing and a prayer?" What are our reasons for hope? Is hope just "wishful thinking" or is it the most realistic way of all to lay hold of the full breadth of this experience we call "life?"

According to the wisdom of dictionary.com, hope is:

1. The feeling that what is wanted can be had...or that "things will turn out for the best."

To which I say "Good Luck!"

2. The second, more archaic definition of hope is “to believe, desire or trust.” This kind of hope has nothing to do with luck-or with being fortunate or unfortunate. It has to do with a relationship, a relationship that you desire, believe in, and trust above all else.

Let’s discover how that kind of hope is a “living hope,” indeed.

I have a friend named Neels: a South African man who has dealt with adversity for much of his life. He has physical disabilities which bring him much pain and which in turn have led to spiritual struggles with depression and even with despair. Yet Neels remains one of the strongest, most genuinely hopeful people I have ever known.

Neels has suffered with his neck and spine for years, and recently he fell and damaged his cervical spine in such a way that crushed and nearly severed his spinal cord. He was paralyzed from the neck down and had to breathe with a ventilator. The prognosis was grim and he was sent to Marionjoy Rehabilitation Hospital in Wheaton for what little could be done.

When I visited Neels in November, he had a pipe in his larynx which allowed him to speak. With great effort and patience, after 8 weeks, he was able to lift his hand a little and wiggle his feet. Would he ever be able to do more? This is what he told me:

1. He thanked me for coming, and he expressed his profound gratitude for all the prayers received by his church community and for the love of his family and friends.
2. He expressed to me his absolute conviction that Christ was beside him day and night. As he pointed out the window to the dying light of that short November afternoon, “I watch through my window the light,” he said, “and I know that God cares about me.”
3. “Because of these people helping me, I know that Christ is with me,” he said, looking me straight in the eye. “I am going to walk out of this hospital on my own two feet. I have a life worth living-and I mean to do just that.”

And you know what? Over the next 3 months- Neels lived into that resolve with such unwavering discipline he did indeed walk out of that hospital in February and into the rest of his life-with courage, fortitude, and hope-a living hope in his relationship to Jesus Christ and to Christ’s Body--his church.

Martin Luther said, “Everything that is done in this world is done by hope.”

And Charles Spurgeon, that great 19th Century English preacher, said, “Hope itself is like a star: not to be seen in the sunshine of prosperity, and only to be discovered in the night of adversity.” During these weeks of Covid-19, my hope has been buoyed by the Evening Star, Venus, shining high in the western sky each night-- enormous, brilliant and twinkling. That sight brings me hope- because hope in a heavenly gift, is it not? One of God’s greatest mercies.

And it comes unbidden, even unexpected, like a song in the night.

Emily Dickinson defines hope this way: “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.”

This past week, with its weather extremes of shirt-sleeved sunshine followed by frigid sheets of snow has reminded me a little of the political weather surrounding this virus: one day we are told we may never be able to shake hands again, and the next that we are all free to go down to the beach and play.

What are we supposed to hope for?

And who are we supposed to believe?

Well, our text from 1 Peter encourages us to put our hope in Christ and specifically, in his resurrection. When we place our faith in that, then Christ is raised again in us, securing our confidence in an inheritance kept in heaven for us, beyond the confines of this world. As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

Infinite hope is eternal hope, a living hope built on God’s infinite mercies and realized by faith. Moreover, this faith results in our spiritual protection-not necessarily from the Coronavirus-but from the spiritual virus of discouragement, disillusion, anger and despair that has been eating away at this nation for years.

I have felt this “living hope” this week, as I heard the notes of a bright red cardinal, singing boldly through the snowfall, unfazed. If a little red bird can be so sure of living, then maybe we can too.

And I've felt something more than this, people, something rising in my soul that's whispering, "*See? I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it?*"

It's more like a song than a statement-something I can't exactly put into words, but it's a growing conviction that God is going to bring forth something GOOD--spectacularly GOOD-- in and through our battle with this virus. I see it in our First Responders, and in the faces of friends and neighbors- something that has to do with the fact that we were all created in love and for love; and for a life together, a life transcending politics, nations, and race. I don't see it in the corridors of power, but I do see it in the face of a new mother cuddling her baby, a doctor who's been taking care of other people's children throughout this pandemic. I see it in the Facebook post of another mother's two adult daughters, both nurses, the older daughter released from the ICU to go home to have her baby while the younger one puts on her shield and face-mask to go bravely into the ER...

Yes-there's a great big song welling up in me today, a lot like the one Curtis Mayfield sang during a different time in our national life together....a song that became the carrier of a living hope. It goes like this....

*People get ready
There's a train a coming
You don't need no ticket
You just get on board.*

*Faith is the key
Open the doors and board them
Don't need no ticket
You just thank the Lord.*

Friends, as John S. Dunne wrote, "When hope rises, life rises."

Let's get ready for that.