

EASTER SUNDAY, March 27, 2016  
National Presbyterian Church  
**Rock Solid Hope**  
Luke 24:13-31  
David Renwick,

On this Easter Sunday morning, I'd like us to think together about hope. The kind of rock solid hope that God wants to place within our souls as a result of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not just hope that is wishful thinking, but hope that has a foundation, a basis, a premise. A hope that gives vibrancy and purpose to our lives, that restores a sense of the future, that cannot be shaken.

The sad truth, unfortunately, is that many people live their lives without this kind of hope. In fact, some estimates [The Prevalence of Hopelessness Among Adults , Int.J Psychiatry Med. 2010; 40(1): 77-91] indicate that up to 30% of the population of adults and adolescents live with prolonged periods in which they have a sense of hopelessness – the kind that affects what they do. Instead of going out, they stay in, instead of getting down to work, they sit around, instead of being with others, they remain alone.

Of course – all of us need to slow down, and stay in, and sit around, and remain alone from time to time. But there's a time when we know that something's happening, that something's wrong or missing. When the pain is growing, and everything's slowing down and life itself seems to be grinding to a halt – because there's no hope!

Sometimes there's a real medical issue involved – when the darkness gets really dark, and there's no end in sight. Some of us here today feel this way, and need to check in with a doctor who can help. But much of the time this hopelessness simply has to do with what life throws at us, and with the normal difficulties and our natural difficulty with processing it all.

For example, when we lose someone we love. Maybe our partner of many years dies, and we're in grief. It's quite natural for a sense of hopelessness to accompany grief so that it's hard to get going again. It's hard to visualize or to step into a new future – by ourselves – a future we had not wanted or planned, or that we resent. And so for a while, quite naturally, we feel...well... hopeless!

And this can happen in other areas and times of life as well – not just times of grief [search, Antony Sciole and Henry Biller, Hope in An Age of Anxiety]. We may feel hopeless at times when any kind of relationship is broken. We may feel forsaken or abandoned by someone, or we may feel failure that someone's let us down, or that we have let someone else down. We may feel like we're all alone...and there's no hope!

Or we can feel hopeless at times when we feel small or powerless. Sometimes powerless because of ourselves (because of our own weakness) or sometimes because of strength or size of others (because of their constant, never-ending opposition or oppression). So a feeling of hopelessness descends.

And it can come too, when we feel trapped: by age, or by a medical diagnosis, or by lingering illness, or by our background (maybe a traumatic event haunts us) or by thoughts and habits that we cannot conquer.

There are all kinds of circumstances more powerful than we are. And we scream at God: “Why did you make me thus? Why do you put out of my depth? I feel so hopeless!! And stuck, with no way forward...”

Of course, sometimes time itself is a healer, and we just move on without quite knowing how we did it. Sometimes, God brings someone into our lives to help us. (Here at the church, one of the great programs we have to help is called *GriefShare*.) And sometimes we move on by digging deep in our souls and finding inner resources we never knew we had.

But this morning, what I’d like to suggest is that sometimes we get stuck in hopelessness because we’re looking in the wrong place.

Sometimes the ingredient we need for living a life of hope has nothing to do with time, or with others, or with inner strength. It has nothing to do with what’s going on on the inside. It comes only to us from the outside, from something new that may never have entered our head before and that gives to us a new vision of the present and which changes the game.

For example, let me take you back 500 years to the late 1400s to a time when (some scholars argue), all of Europe was suffering from such hopelessness. People had run out of steam, and energy, and creativity (which may not be too far from the truth today – at the very least, Europe is in pain and is perplexed about where the future lies).

Rabbi Edwin Friedman (“A Failure of Nerve” and elsewhere) uses a psychological term: he says that Europe was STUCK!! And it was only when something happened outside of Europe – when a New World was discovered in the west (our world!) and when a new shipping route to Asia was discovered round Horn of Africa – that hope was restored and a future opened up that they could never have imagined. When it did, it was like the dam burst and hope flooded in in a way that had not been conceivable before.

*[NOTE: I realize of course that this story is more complex than what I’m sharing. Others experienced the opposite: they experienced hopelessness as they were enslaved and conquered: no history is without its complexity and dark side!]*

Historian Will Durant writes:

*The opening of the western and southern seas to navigation and trade affected the greatest commercial revolution in history before the coming of the airplane. It ended the Mediterranean epoch in the history of western civilization, and began the Atlantic era. As more and more of America's gold came to Spain, industry was stimulated in Western Europe, and demanded the mechanical inventions, and better forms of power, that made the Industrial Revolution. The influx of gold and silver changed the social structure...as it raised prices, encouraged manufacturers, broke up the system of workers, creditors, and feudal lords. New crops and plants came from America to enrich European agriculture: the potato, tomato, artichoke, squash, maize. Christianity was spread over a vast hemisphere. The Spanish and Portuguese languages were given to Latin America. The intellect was powerfully moved by the revelation of so many peoples, customs, and cults. Above all, just when Copernicus was about to reduce the cosmic importance of the earth and its inhabitants, people felt that the world of matter had been conquered by the courage of the human mind. All limits were removed; all the world was open; everything seemed possible.*

"The Reformation--A History of European Civilization from Wycliffe to Calvin: 1300-1564" by Will Durant; Simon and Schuster: New York, 1957. Chapter XIII - The Conquest of the Sea: 1492-1517 pp. 862-863.

This new spirit of hope was symbolized graphically, Durant says, by the changing of the old negative medieval motto for Gibraltar – "Ne Plus Ultra" or "No More Beyond" – to the positive "Plus Ultra" meaning "More Beyond." In other words: there's way more out there, and I want to be there. A new horizon! A new future! Hope!

And how did it happen? Well, not because of grim determination. Not because people looked inside themselves and tried harder, gritted their teeth, and pulled themselves up!

It happened because something new entered people's consciousness from the outside; something that they'd never seen or thought of or believed in before: an open door to the future through the discoveries of the "new world" in the west and a new passage to India and Asia in the east.

And all of this happened on the testimony of just a handful of people: Vasco da Gama, Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci and Ferdinand Magellan. A small handful of people said, "There's something out there you've never seen...but we've seen it and if you believe us, it'll change your world!" And it did – restoring hope in buckets to the hopeless.

Which is one of the things that happened to the followers of Jesus on that first Easter Sunday. In Luke 24, two of Jesus' friends are walking from Jerusalem to a town called Emmaus. And as they walk it's clear that they are people whose hearts are broken and whose sense of hope has been crushed.

They're in grief and shock. Their best friend, Jesus – just two days before – had been unjustly and brutally murdered. And with his death their reason for living and being together seemed to vanish into thin air.

He'd promised to be like a king who'd deliver the world (and especially their nation of Israel) from all its troubles. But now it looked as if the world and all its troubles was way more powerful than he and they could handle.

He promised, too, that they would have work to do, a purpose to pursue, a place within his kingdom. But now his promises had become empty and meaningless. They were left powerless, trapped, small, insignificant, and overwhelmed by forces that had trampled on everything they held dear, with a callousness and ease they could never match.

Until, of course, that began to change on Easter Sunday morning and on into the day.

It was late Easter afternoon when Jesus – risen from the grave – walked up to these two as they were going from Jerusalem to a town called Emmaus, and joined the conversation. He asked them what they were discussing:

*They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" <sup>19</sup>He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*

Hopeless! That's how they felt.

But then they added this, with a glimmer of hope:

*Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.*

A glimmer of hope that turned into buckets of hope before the evening was out, when they both realized that the man beside them was Jesus himself. Different, to be sure, but very much alive.

And with that knowledge, a new world began. Not based on trying harder, not based on wishful thinking, not based just on “really wanting to believe,” but based on seeing Jesus alive! Jesus alive – no longer a victim but the conqueror of death. Jesus alive – no longer at the mercy of bullies, but King of all creation. Jesus alive – not dying as a tragedy, but suffering as part of God’s eternal plan: a sacrifice for the sins of the world, for your sins and mine. Jesus alive – not gone forever leaving only memories behind, but living for ever as a friend who would never fail them or leave them. Jesus alive – with open arms, welcoming them by grace into his Kingdom for all eternity.

In one fell swoop with the Resurrection everything changed. “No More Beyond” became “More Beyond.” “Ne Plus Ultra” becomes “Plus Ultra” – “More Beyond” forever.

But let’s be clear: metaphor does not do this. Metaphor does not restore hope! The mere “idea” of resurrection, does not restore hope! Wishful thinking does not restore hope.

John Updike gets it right . . . he wrote in 1964 (“Seven Stanzas At Easter”)

*Make no mistake. If he rose at all, it was as his body.*

*If the cell’s dissolution did not reverse, the molecules re-knit, the amino acids rekindle, the church will fall.*

*It was not as the flowers, each soft spring recurrent;*

*It was not as his spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;*

*it was as his flesh ours.*

*Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, side-stepping transcendence; making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded fragility of earlier ages;*

*let us walk through the door. . .*

And that’s what the first disciples did, and what others have been doing for 2,000 years since then. Jesus Alive! A dead end reversed. They saw him and proclaimed him with words that were just as unlikely and yet just as certain as the words of De Gama, and Columbus, and Vespucci, and Magellan and others 500 years ago, 1,500 years later: “There’s a new world out there! A new way forward – to the east and the west.”

“So with us there’s a new Savior out there,” they proclaimed, “that no one and nothing can stop! Not even death. A Savior who holds your past, your present and your future in the palm of his hand and who call us to place our lives too, in the palm of his hands.”

Friends: Christ IS alive! Believe the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection! Build your life on this solid rock.

As with Europe 500 years ago, you’ll find an eternal hope that opens up your future right here and now – restoring energy and vitality to all you do!

“Plus Ultra”...hope! There’s way more beyond...

“*And we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel*” – what despair! But that’s not the last word by any stretch of the imagination: “*Then their eyes were opened – and they recognized him.*”

Rock solid hope! Theirs. And ours too!

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