

September 11, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

## Hope: Letting Life Win

2 Corinthians 1; Psalm 40:1-4

Dr. David Renwick

Our call to worship is from Paul's second letter to the Church in Corinth in Chapter 1. Let me read a few of those words again. He writes, "for just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. God who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us. On Him we have set our hope."

THREE VIRTUES THAT ARE ETERNAL. Over the past couple of weeks in our sermons we've been considering two virtues that the Apostle Paul mentions as he writes to the Church in Corinth (not in his second letter but in his first letter), a church located in southern Greece, and writing at about 20 to 30 years after Jesus' life and death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of First Corinthians speaks about these two virtues: faith and love. And he holds these up as eternal – virtues that will last forever, to which we are to aspire, which God wants us to have within our lives. He says that the greatest of these is clearly love, but both of them are eternal, and not only these two, faith and love, but into the mix he throws a third virtue which is also eternal – to which we also must aspire as followers of Jesus Christ. And this third virtue, right up there with faith and love, is the virtue of hope. Hope!

We might say to ourselves, "*well I can understand why faith and love are up there and I agree that hope is a good thing. But why in the world does Paul elevate it right up to the top as eternal?*" . . . Why in the same rank as faith and love?

Well, on this Sunday in particular, this Sunday when we think back to the '9/11' tragedy which occurred ten years ago, a day in which many people were robbed of all sense of hope, we want to think about hope and why it is ranked 'right up there.'

Let me begin by thinking first of all about the common uses of the word in everyday language; and then let's think about the word hope in the context of Christian faith, Biblical faith, the faith of the first Christians in particular. And as we do that, I 'hope' that along the way we'll begin to see why Paul would take this virtue, which is good and right, and elevate it to

this position of enormous prominence. So – faith, love and hope remain (meaning, into eternity), he says – and, therefore, these three are to be critical components of our lives.

HOPE AS BRIGHTNESS AND OPTIMISM. Let's today then think together about hope and begin by asking what is it that comes into our minds when you think of hope or when you think of a person who is a hopeful person? I must admit my mind immediately races to two words: the word 'optimism' and the word to 'brightness.' Those are the words that come to my mind when I think of a hopeful person.

A hopeful person is more optimistic than pessimistic.

A hopeful person thinks that the glass is half full rather than half empty.

A hopeful person in the midst of problems sees the possibilities and the opportunities.

And, by and large, I'd rather be with a hopeful person than somebody who is not a hopeful person. Sometimes they may be in our opinion a little 'Pollyanna-ish!' Or, they may seem to be a little naïve, to be so hopeful. But nevertheless it's good to be around such people who brighten our lives by their attitude of hope. And this is how I would begin to think about hope, in terms primarily of optimism and brightness – and my guess is that Paul has some of this understanding in his mind when he speaks about hope, alongside faith and love.

HOPE AND THE FUTURE: SIMPLE OR PROFOUND. But both the words optimism and brightness lead me to another sense in which we use the word hope, because optimism and brightness are frequently connected with the future. So, we often use the word hope in this connection, saying that 'we hope for' something, for something that is not here yet,' something that we can see, but only in our imagination, and we want it to become real and present to us. There are things that we 'hope for' in this future sense, which is why we frequently speak of hope in the same context as we speak about dreams. What are your 'hopes and dreams' we ask?

So that to be a hopeful person in this sense is to be a dreamer and perhaps even to be a 'wishful thinker,' wishing for something to happen in the present which doesn't yet exist, but which might come into existence. And some of these hopes and dreams and wishes can be serious and some of them can be very simple and almost child-like.

So, for example, a common way which a child might use the word hope would be in terms of Christmas or in terms of a birthday and they say "*You know, I really hope that at Christmas or my birthday I will get this toy -- maybe a doll or a train set or, these days they may ask for an I-Pod or I-Pad or computer or something else like that. And as parents we respond to our children, and perhaps say "well there's no hope of that!" . . . Or on the other*

hand we say “*You know, you never know if you’ll get what you wish for. If you wish for it, you may get what you hope for.*”

So there is this very common everyday sense of the word hope, referring to something down the pike, in a future that we want but which doesn’t exist yet, that we would like to come our way!!

It can be that simple! But it can also be profound, linked almost with prophecy, which looks into the future and en-visions things, and then speaks about them: things which are not-yet but which might be. And sometimes in the very naming of that future, which has no existence yet, except in our imagination, we actually increase the likelihood that that day might come into being.

For example, think back to 1963 and to a speech that was made here in Washington, the words of which almost all of us know or remember. What we call the ‘I have a dream’ speech. MLK, Jr, had a ‘dream’ about the future, of what might be within our nation and within our world. And the speaking of that vision, that hope, that dream has had great power to bring at least some of it to pass. Obviously not completely in any sense. It’s still in the future. It still is out there. But the very speaking of such a serious vision often brings the future into the present. What we hope for comes our way.

HOPE AND THE FUTURE: NOT ALWAYS OPTIMISTIC OR BRIGHT. Sometimes when we think of hope in this way it is a bright hope, a bright vision that we are optimistic about: we believe it will happen. Sometimes, though, we may not be at all optimistic that it will come to pass: we hope for it – but we really don’t think it’s going to happen.

This week a member of the congregation told me that they had heard a recent interview on National Public Radio (you can hear it on the web), which focuses on hope, but from a very original perspective. The person who was interviewed was a man by the name of Hisham Matar. Mr. Matar was born in Libya. His father was a Libyan activist (a very dangerous occupation!) who disappeared. Disappeared! Twenty years ago he disappeared and his family have never seen or heard from him since. He may be dead. He may be languishing in a dismal prison somewhere. He surely might well have been tortured. They know nothing about that. But Hisham Matar says that since that day, he has lived in “constant hope of his father’s safe return.” And then he added these words. Strange words, but important. He added that this kind of a hope is really “a terrible thing – a very dispossessing thing.”

What a strange thing to say! What in the world does he mean by that? Well, I suppose he means something like this: that the longer this kind of hope lasts, the less likely the hope has of being fulfilled. Just the law of averages; the chances increase that his father is actually dead. And yet he cannot let go of this hope: to let it go would probably feel like a betrayal in

some sense. But, always carrying this hope means that he cannot quite fully live in the present and enjoy life either. He has to hold onto this hope on the one hand and he has to live in the present on the other hand and he is torn between the two, 'dispossessed' of any peace. And it is his hope that does this! And so he says this hope is a, a terrible thing

... *Which is surely not, surely not, what the apostle Paul has in mind when he thinks about hope.* Surely this hope that he says that is right up there with faith and with love is not "a terrible, dispossessing thing," but the opposite: something which is wonderful and gives us the possession of life in a way that we would never have had before. Surely this is why he places hope right up there with faith and with love.

THE PRESENT PREMISE OF HOPE. And yet ... on this one point I think that Hisham Matar has something important to say and with which, I think the apostle Paul would at least partially agree ... that the very premise of hope, why we need to think about hope in the first place, at least, here on earth; why it is up there in that top rank with faith and love, is the premise that Mr. Matar experiences: that something in life is missing.<sup>1</sup> Something important in life has gone missing. Something is not right. Indeed something is wrong with life and we can't always put our finger on it but at times it seems to quite literally blow up in our face and we know that this is the truth and that it will continue to be the truth. And it is precisely because this downside, this underside, this wrongness with life will not ever go away – that we need hope. It is because of that that we must have hope or we would be all victims of absolute despair.

To put it another way:

- Until the end of time we are to expect the unexpected until the end of time. That phone call may well come our way that we don't want to hear which says heart attack or cancer or tragedy or accident or stroke.
- Until the end of time there will be always those devastating reports like the report in December the 7<sup>th</sup> 1941. There are planes swarming in from out of the blue and the fleet has been destroyed.
- Until the end of time there is the possibility that what happened ten years ago today may happen elsewhere again at the very moment when we least expected the awful unexpected, the terrible unexpected may happen.

And this, strangely, is one reason why we need hope. The apostle Paul I'm convinced believed this, that this need for hope would be eternal, precisely because he saw the world through the lens of Jesus Christ. Not only through the *lens of Jesus' life*: we all, I think, aspire to live up to His life; but through *the lens of His death*, and through *the lens of His resurrection* as well. Each component of that linkage became something

which defined for him his understanding of life-as-it-is, and life as-it-will-be-for-sure, which he could embrace in hope.

Let me put it like this. When the apostle Paul looked at the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, when he looked at Good Friday and when he saw that this, this awful thing could happen to this good man, to this the best of all people, to this God-man, then who are we to say this will not happen to us if it happened to Him? Indeed it will happen to us and we must expect the unexpected.

This is not pessimism, this is Christian realism. A realism through the lens of Christ that the early Christians all embraced. Let me take you to another author, to the first letter of Peter and, to the fourth chapter, written because Christians are suffering. And First Peter chapter four says, "Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings."

I think the logic is simple and clear. If Christ suffered my friends, and we are his followers, what happened to him may well happen to us. Do not be surprised or caught unaware. Until he comes again this is part of the paradigm of life. If the world seemed unfair, unjust, bizarre; if the world acted in an absurd way in its treatment of the Son of God (how could this happen with Jesus?), then those same experiences will occur with us in other contexts of life as well, until he comes again.

And this is the underside. This is why we need hope so desperately. This is the beginning. This is the *first word of hope*. **BUT, it is also quite clearly not the last word of hope.** Indeed there is, and there always will be for Christians, the second word that follows.

The word of the cross is the first word. But the word that follows for all eternity is the word of resurrection of life. If there is death, or deadliness in any form, what we know, as Christians, is that God is still at work, yes! at work in the midst of death! And death will not win. It will always be followed by life. The resurrection wins. Easter wins over Good Friday.

HOPE: BASED ON THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS (AN UNCHANGEABLE FOUNDATION). On that day, for all the horrible unexpected things that happen in life, the joke belonged to God. The unexpected belonged to God. The resurrection won out, and God spoke through that event not only to those disciples who seemed to be without hope when they saw their friend crucified, but to you and me, and says to us that because of that event on that day which we remember every Sunday when we gather (we gather on the Lord's Day, the day of the Lord's resurrection, Easter, every Sunday), *because of that day we have a hope that is not mere optimism and not mere wishful thinking, but based in the action*

*of God which says that God will always win over death and destruction and evil.*

This experience of 'resurrection' may not happen on our time line. But it *will* happen. So, the Psalmists are always crying out "Lord how long? When will this happen?" And we are admonished by them to "wait patiently on the Lord" (Psalm 40), for we will see his action in due course, if we wait, in hope – not hope with no foundation! But hope that is certain because of the resurrection of Christ: we will see his action in due course. He will "*lift us up out of the miry bog and place our feet on solid ground.*" And of this we can be confident. Of this we can indeed be certain. This is Christian, life-giving hope.

The apostle Paul writes to those Corinthians not only about this triumvirate of faith, love and hope but in his second letter, as we read in our call to worship, he shares with them, that they were suffering (and they were), then so too was he: just because he was close to God because he was an apostle, the great missionary of the Church, he didn't have an exemption pass! Some of the Christians in Corinth believed that the closer you were to God the less you suffer! Nonsense says Paul. The opposite is true: if Christ suffered, so shall we (cf Philippians 3). So he says in effect, "Let me share with you that as a follower of Christ when I was in Asia he says Asia Minor, Turkey, I was so utterly unbearably crushed that I despaired of life itself." Then he adds this: "But this was to make me depend not on myself but on God. What kind of God? On God who raises the dead. And on this, this God, on this act of God in Jesus Christ I have placed my hope."

A life changing event in history more solid than that life-changing, nation-changing event ten years ago. An event in history, which changes everything and gives us a solid foundation.

HOPE BASED ON GLIMPSES OF RESURRECTION SPRINKLED THROUGH HISTORY. But, but this 'resurrection' is not just an event back there. I believe that what we see in our lives and we see throughout history is that God takes that Easter event, the event that follows Good Friday and, as it were, sprinkles it throughout history; indeed, sprinkles resurrection glimpses into the midst of every deadly event or piece of bad news that we can receive. So that though the darkness may seem to be overwhelming that flicker of light is always there. And sometimes it shines with amazing brightness.

Sometimes it shone with amazing brightness, even on September 11, 2001. Think back to the awful tragic inhuman stories that come from that day ten years ago on September the 11<sup>th</sup>. And we say how can this be? And yet in a week like this, our news, our television stations have been filled not just with the tragedy, but with amazing stories of good things that happened in the midst of the darkness; glimmers of resurrection, which come in amazing ways. Just, like the phone call at the end of the day that was received by

Admiral Crenshaw. Out of the blue a familiar voice which is, "How are you? Can I pray for you?" The sign of resurrection in the midst of the darkness. Hope in a place of despair.

And some of you may have those stories whether they have to do with September the 11<sup>th</sup> or with some other event in your life that you look back to and you say I hope that will never happen again. And yet in the midst of that God was at work redeeming the darkness. I have my own story I'll share it with you briefly.

On that day ten years ago I was in Glasgow in Scotland at the airport. I had just dropped off my daughter who was spending a semester abroad in her junior year. She was going to be studying at the University of Edinburgh. I'd taken her around to visit all our relatives and I was waiting to fly back to this country. We boarded at 4:00 a.m. Eastern Standard time, 9:00 United Kingdom time, Flight 17 on Continental Airlines, and took off across the Atlantic. At noon EST the pilot came on the intercom and told us that there were 'operational difficulties' at Newark and that we were being diverted to St John's, Newfoundland, and that we would not be able to land in Newark as far as he knew. We would make alternative arrangements. He did not tell us everything that was happening fortunately. So we thought of this as an inconvenience and then we settled down. The plane had to get rid of fuel. It was about an hour later that we landed. Once on the ground, we taxied in toward the terminal, and then past it, and realized that this was different: it was like being part of an X-Files movie. Twenty transatlantic jets had already landed already in what was a moderate regional airport, designed for four or five max. They were all scattered throughout the airport. And there's silence on the plane as we weave our way through these jets and the pilot parks this huge jet along with about five others. And then the pilot tells us what has happened. And once again there's silence, on the plane until we begin to figure out what's happening and we try to call our loved ones and nothing is getting through on anybody's cell phones. People are lending their cell phones to others but nothing is getting through at that time and we sit on the place for the next 12 hours until after midnight when the Canadian government has decided what to do to process us all. 15,000 of us landed in Newfoundland that day. It's an island of 500,000 people, 4,000 in St. John's (a few hundred immediately asked for political asylum so the Canadian authorities had to deal with that too!).

We finally got off the plane and in a sense that's when the miracle began or we began to see the light shining . . . It was about 1:00 in the morning. We're passing through customs. We're into St. John's, and there are all kinds of people up and they were giving to us sandwiches and they were offering us help and they're showing us comfort. We spent that night and the five nights that followed on the floor in the Civic Center of St.

John's: 500 people on cots that were provided. Everything that we needed was provided. All I was allowed to take off the plane was this little pencil bag with my ticket, toothbrush and passport in it. This is all we had. But clothing, anything we needed, food, shelter, food, medicines (you can imagine in 15,000 people the medical problems) *all taken care of for free.* *There was this sense of being homeless but not bereft, not hopeless.* We had a taste of what it is like for a homeless person to have someone come up to them and say 'let me take care of you.' A resurrection moment in the midst of what was a truly dark day.

Christian faith embraces both. We are not naive. The cross is real. Evil is real. It was for Christ, and remains that way within this world in which we live. But . . . it doesn't have the final word. The final word is resurrection. Not death but life.

True then, true now and the apostle Paul says this must be true within our lives. This is part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. This is why hope is raised right up there with faith and love as central to our lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

May God give to you and me no matter how deep the darkness may be for us and for some of us it may be deep indeed. May God give to you and me not just a vague optimism or wishful thinking but hope based on the rock solid news of the life of Jesus Christ on that first Easter Sunday. Proof that nothing or no one can take away.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God come to us. Place signs of Your life, Your resurrection within our lives and within our community and through this church, through our lives alone and together may both the first word and Your last word sound forth to a needy world. In Your Holy Name we pray, Amen.

1 With regard to hope being 'eternal,' I have not dealt in this sermon with the great question about why there is a need for hope in heaven – where evil has been destroyed forever. I suspect that Paul would say that the earthly premise is over; but heaven still somehow contains a future that because of the resurrection, we can be assured will be bright.

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800