

THE BIRTH OF HOPE

John 20:1-18

Sermon presented by The Rev. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church,
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“Rick, how can you listen to this god awful stuff?”

I was at a day-long meeting in Commack. At the lunch break several of us jumped in my car, to make a McDonalds run. As soon as I turned the ignition key, the CD in the CD-player started-up. It was Martina McBride. We have to listen to CDs and downloads, because there are no radio stations here that play country-western. The chorus from her “Cry Cry (Till the Sun Shines)” filled the car with its gritty hopefulness.

Cry, cry ‘til the sun shines baby,

Cry, cry ‘til the sun shines.

It’s gonna be alright, it’s gonna be alright, baby,

Cry, cry ‘til the sun shines.

And the question came from the back seat: “Rick, how can you listen to this god awful stuff?”

I think he meant awful, a-w-ful. But it wouldn’t be far wrong to say: yes, I do listen to this God awful, a-w-e-ful, stuff. Because this lyric states well our belief in an awesome God: a God who does not make life easy, effortless or trouble-free, but who in the end prevails, so that even at our darkest, most despairing times, we cry, not as those who have no hope, but in the certainty that by God’s grace the sun will shine again.

In the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, set in prison, Andy (played by Tim Robbins) tells Red (the Morgan Freeman character) that he ought to take-up the harmonica again, like he used to do, years earlier, and make music again.

“It doesn’t make much sense in here,” Red explains.

“Here’s where it makes the most sense,” Andy says. “You need it so you don’t forget.”

“Forget? Forget what?”

“Forget that there are places in this world that aren’t made of stone. That there’s something inside that they can’t get to, that they can’t touch. That’s yours.”

“What are you talking about?” Red asks.

“Hope,” Andy answers simply. I’m talking about hope.

And that’s what I’m talking about today – hope, that something inside that no one can get to; that no matter how dark the day of discouragement, how sad the season of sorrow, how intense the time of testing, nothing in this present awful world (that’s awful, a-w), can touch or take-away the inner confidence that God’s world is ultimately awful (a-w-e) – that is, full-of-awe – awesome in His beauty and bounty, awesome in the wonders of His love.

The source of true hope, and the energy which gives birth to it and sustains it, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. People can learn to be optimistic in other ways. You don’t need

Jesus Christ in your life to have a positive mental attitude. But hope is different than just that. It's greater than learning to change one's thinking so as not to dwell on failures, or to bring a "glass-half-full" rather "glass-half-empty" attitude to life's difficult situations. These are important things to do, by the way, and I don't demean them at all. Many researchers, a few of whom I'll mention later, have made important discoveries in recent years about the importance of a person's outlook to health and happiness, and how an optimistic outlook can be taught and learned. That's all good stuff. But hope – genuine hope -- is not mere technique. Rather, as theologian Darrell Jodock explains:

Hope arises not from [anything in] the situation itself, but from something outside the situation. Hope is based not on what I can do, but on what another is doing.

And that "other" whose "doing" creates and transmits hope is Jesus Christ, in whose resurrection, evil, sin and death are exposed as powerless and defeated decisively. We "cry, cry 'til the sun shines," not because we've learned how to manage our moods, but because we know the sun will shine. On Easter we call to mind with special fervor and gratitude this birth of hope.

Those in Jesus' inner circle regarded his death as the end of him, of course, and also the end of the message he taught and the new life he brought. They hunkered down in-hiding – grief-stricken, embarrassed (no one wants to be associated with a loser), and afraid that the surging anti-Jesus sentiment in the crowds might not have dissipated with his crucifixion, but turn on them next, in the same way that after an enemy is eliminated the victors start tracking-down collaborators. Alone among them, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb "early on the first day of the week," for reasons that are unclear. A cottage industry has developed in recent years of interpreters trying to re-imagine Mary's relationship with Jesus, her role among the disciples, and her purpose in going to the tomb. These interpretations may say a thing or two of interest about the interpreter, but offer nothing reliable about Mary, since the text is silent. Most likely she was merely wakeful, and in her grief wished to visit the tomb. Certainly she did not expect to find that Jesus had risen from the dead. When she found the stone removed she assumed, not that there'd been resurrection, but that there'd been mischief, that his body had been stolen in the night. This is what she told Peter and the other disciple: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they laid him." Mary exhibited no optimism, no eager expectation, no glass-half-full chirpiness. Hers' was a brooding darkness. Peter and the other disciple did nothing to lighten her mood. They hurried to the tomb with her, checked things out, shrugged in confusion, then went back to sleep, leaving Mary standing alone, "weeping outside the tomb."

Mary might have profited from some common wisdom, such as the kind we may offer to those who are going through difficult times. Doesn't she know that "every cloud has a silver lining?" That "it's always darkest before the dawn?" That "all good things come to those who wait?" That "when the going gets tough, the tough get going?" No, common wisdom may contain bits-and-pieces of useful insight, and may comfort or encourage for awhile, yet cannot transmit or secure hope that triumphs and endures. True hope is born when there's a new reality

that points beyond anything in this world, to a source of goodness which the world cannot add-to nor take-from.

That new reality comes to Mary – and comes to us – in the message of Easter. She becomes aware of the presence of another. Thinking he’s the gardener, she asks if he knows anything about the disappearance of Jesus’ body. “Mary!” the figure says, simply. “Mary.” And at that moment she recognizes that he is Jesus, come back to life. God triumphs. Love overcomes all. Hope is born.

If we follow this story to the end, we shall see it teaches three things about hope.

First: hope is power. At the empty tomb Jesus at once said to Mary: “Do not hold on to me . . . but go.” When a person is first encountered by the risen Lord, the initial reaction is to hold on. This is natural. If you’re being swept downstream and suddenly a rock appears, you reach out and hold on. But you can’t live the rest of your life on the rock. Sooner or later, rested and refreshed, and renewed in strength, you head back into the rapids. “Do not hold on to me, [Mary] . . . but go.”

Norman Cousins wrote:

The capacity for hope is the most significant fact of life.
It provides humans beings with a sense of destination and
the energy to get started.

A research team led by psychologist C. R. Snyder, at the University of Kansas, documents the importance of hope in overcoming obstacles. All of us come-up against obstacles in our lives. Low-hope people tend to give-up. They blame others. They see themselves as victims. Feeling helpless, they slip into discouragement. On the other hand, Snyder reports:

When confronted with blockages, higher hope people perceive that they can use alternate routes, and that they have the [power] to activate themselves [to try those alternatives]. As such [he concludes] hopeful thinking not only facilitates success during unimpeded goal pursuits, but is especially helpful in the face of impediments.

When Jesus said this to Mary -- “do not hold on to me . . . but go” -- it’s not because life is going to be easy out there. The post-Easter world is just as terror-filled as the Good Friday world. Blockages, obstacles and impediments await. But having experienced the empty tomb and the risen Lord, Easter-people have confidence in the power of God to triumph, and ultimately to cause all things to work together for good. Easter transmits power to let-go and move-on.

Luther said: “The resurrection consists not in words, but in life and power.” Easter hope is about power.

Second: hope is about passion. When the risen Lord said to Mary “go,” he did not mean for her to go-away, or to go-off by herself to ponder these things. Rather, go at once to the

others and say to them, “I have seen the Lord.” She is to go forth with conviction, enthusiasm, and passion.

We can “say with confidence, the Lord is my helper/I will not be afraid,” it is written in the Book of Hebrews, Chapter 13, verse six. The Christian goes forth in confidence that the great hope born on Easter will be fulfilled, so there is no reason to be afraid.

In his book *Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life*, Eugene Peterson critiques the typical Christian identity, and although at first we may question what he says, on reflection I think you’ll agree he speaks wisely. He writes:

It’s a curious thing but not uncommon for Christians to begin well and gradually get worse. Instead of progressing like a pilgrim from strength to strength, we regress. Just think of the Christians you really admire. Aren’t most of them recent converts? Isn’t it exciting? Then think of the Christians that you’re just bored to death with. Aren’t they people who have been Christians for forty or fifty years? They are wearing-out – not just in body, but in everything else, too. There are exceptions, of course. But [most of us] lose our vitality. We become dull. We continue to go through these life-affirming, Christ-honoring motions, but our hearts are no longer in it.

How on earth can a person ever take Easter so for granted that our hearts are no longer in it? But it happens. It happens to many of us, perhaps to all of us. When we lose this first passion for Jesus Christ – and we don’t lose it suddenly, but gradually, day-by-day – what we lose is the immediacy, spontaneity and exuberance of resurrection life. Hope restores immediacy, spontaneity and exuberance.

Dr. Bruce Dykman, in the Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin, has studied the relationship between hope and depression. His research shows that “people who set validation-seeking goals are more prone to depressive episodes” than those motivated by intrinsic purposes. By “validation-seeking goals” is meant strivings to prove one’s self-worth, to make a favorable impression, to be likeable, to please people and to do whatever’s needed to gain the praise and favor of others. These attitudes are toxic for well-being, he writes. Healthier by far is an attitude by which a person knows who he/she is, and to what purpose one’s passions are directed and invested, that “something inside that the world that can’t get to.”

The love of God in Jesus Christ is all the validation a person needs. And Easter declares and secures that identity.

One of the most moving passage in literature in the scene in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, when the pious and beloved Father Zossima is dying. His students and followers gather around the bed to hear his final words.

“Hate not those who reject you, who insult you, who abuse and slander you,” he teaches

them. That is: do not so take Christ so for granted that you abandon the Christ-like character of sweetness and mercy, and live as those who have no hope.

“Expound the Gospel to people unceasingly,” he continues; as Jesus told Mary, go and tell others “I have seen the Lord.” Be bold for Christ. Be brave. Be unashamed of the Gospel.

And finally, Father Zossima says: “Cling to the banner and raise it on high.” That is: hold fast to the hope born this day, but do not hide it, or reserve it for a few, or take shelter beneath it, but “raise it on high,” with conviction and passion, for all the world to see.

Hope is about passion.

Finally, hope is about promise. It is written: “We look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18)

Easter witnesses to God’s promise to fulfill his gracious will in ways we may see now only dimly, if at all. Our sanctuary is arrayed with plants which a few months ago were mere clods of dirt. Our worship is inspired by music which began as fleeting, ill-formed thoughts in a composer’s mind, and as mere black dots on a piece of paper. And ever person here can attest to experiences of grace by which what was considered lost was found, what was thought impossible was realized, and what was counted as defeat was transformed into triumph. Hope is a confidence in God to keep his promise to bring light, life and love into the world, even when it seems illogical, implausible or impossible by human reckoning.

And hope is a confidence in God to keep his promise, as expressed Newman’s classic prayer: to support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in his great mercy, may God grant a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

So, cry, cry ‘til the sun shines, baby. Because the sun will shine. This is the great hope that comes to life on Easter: that however dark the night may be, the sun will shine.