

“A Living Hope”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur (Disciples of Christ), Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 1, 2011

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Scriptures: John 20: 19-31; 1 Peter 1: 3-9

John 20: 19-31

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”**²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”**²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”**

Jesus and Thomas

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”**²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, **“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”**²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”²⁹ Jesus said to him, **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”**

The Purpose of This Book

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his

name.

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 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, 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 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.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord?

I love the story about the night a famous theologian and philosopher

was speaking at a convention center filled with Christians.

He spoke for more than two hours

challenging the resurrection of Jesus,

pointing out that there is no proof or evidence of a bodily resurrection.

After he finished his speech an old preacher slowly got up

and walked over to a microphone set up for questions from the audience.

He took an apple out of a paper bag and started to eat it.

“Now, Professor,” he said, “I haven’t read all the books you have.”

Crunch, munch.

“I haven’t travelled or talked or testified at the places you’ve been.”

Crunch, munch.

“But tell me this, Doctor. This here apple I’m eating, is it bitter or sweet?”

The professor said,

“I can’t answer the question because I haven’t tasted the apple.”

The old preacher took the last bite of apple, crunch, munch,

dropped the core into his paper bag,

looked up, and said, *“Neither have you tasted my Jesus.”*

And the crowd went wild.

This one is for those who have not seen and yet believe.

Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

Peter wrote to the church in Asia Minor,

“Blessed be the God and [Creator] of our Lord Jesus Christ!

By God’s great mercy God has given us a new birth into a living hope

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

Even though you have not seen God, you love God.

Even though you do not see God now, you believe in God,

and you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.

You rejoice because you are receiving the outcome of your faith;

you rejoice because you're receiving the salvation of your soul."

A member in our congregation sends me links to articles of interest on spirituality.

I read the article about faith on the computer screen,

glean some knowledge,

have my mind expanded,

listen to see if my beliefs are strengthened or challenged or
both,

and on occasion take a few minutes to scroll down the litany of comments

that have been posted by others who have read the same article.

Sometimes I wonder if we've read the same thing,

or if we are on the same blue planet spinning in the sky.

Some people's comments are quite disturbing.

Especially when it comes to matters of the heart and soul,

or matters of faith and doubt, or matters of whether God has resurrection
power.

Putting aside for now the valid concern we share

for the loss of civility in public discourse,

there seems to be a segment of our population

who assertively refuse to believe in God no matter what,

and an equally aggressive segment

who think it is their responsibility to convert
“nonbelievers”.

Not only do I find the tone and tenor and tension

of the dialogue unsettling and unpleasant,

I actually think it is a waste of perfectly good energy on both sides.

Correct me if I am wrong,

but you will not be convinced to change your mind

or your heart or your entire world view

by someone you don't know or do not trust.

And if you have been hurt or abused or misused in your past,

it is that much harder to build trust,

and it takes much longer than if you had not been hurt.

I understand. Believe me, I do.

Rather than making arguments or seeking to convert or convince, we should build trust.

What does our spiritual practice have to say about this matter?

How do you build trust?

Love.

Love somebody, and let them love you.

Listen.

Listen to someone, and let another soul speak to your heart.

Laugh.

Share laughter, and stay in touch with the lighter side of life.

Commune.

Break bread together.

Share a cup of coffee and piece of pie and listen, love and laugh,

and suddenly, spiritually, simply your encounter becomes holy.

We are not going to be changed nor change another soul

through arguments or disputing truth,

nor by force or violence, by raising the volume or imposition of will.

Here is the point in the message when you might want to duck in case lightning hits.

After 51 years, I have deduced that it is not in my power or ability

nor is it my personal nor professional responsibility

to convince another soul of the presence of God.

William Willimon says,

“I do not think our job is to argue disbelieving people into belief in resurrection.

I think we have got to live lives of discipleship

that make no sense if Jesus had not been raised from the dead.”

“There is no absolute, irrefutable, unassailable “proof” of resurrection.

Even after the resurrection some of Jesus' own disciples doubt.”

“Jesus does not trouble them or himself about their doubts. [Should we?]

Rather Jesus turns to them and commands them:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

Then Jesus sends out his disciples to the far corners of the earth,

not with arguments about the truth,

not with proofs and evidence of a bodily resurrection,

but rather as those whose presence, whose actions,

whose love, whose speech, whose kindness and
care,

whose being and sharing of the Good
News

is the only “proof” of the
resurrection.”[1]

Jesus is not troubled nor does he trouble anyone else or himself with other's doubts.

If it were not for doubt, we would not have faith.

Doubt and faith walk hand in hand;

the opposite of faith is not doubt; it is fear.

When it comes to arguing anyone else into faith and believing,

I do not have the power to make or shake or break anyone else into believing.

What is in my power is my availability to be a living witness,
a living testament, a living hope,
a living word that points to the resurrection of Jesus Christ
into life after life, into life everlasting.

Honestly, I do not know how to convince you
to have a relationship with God and God's people.

All I can bear witness to is what I know in my heart of hearts.

All I can do is extend an invitation based on the reality of my faith experience.

I have sinned,
and Jesus' loving people forgave me.

I have grieved,
and the elders and mothers and fathers and young people carried me,

I have laughed and am having fun,
and Christians turned out to have a wonderful sense of humor.

I've been sick in body and mind,
and I found healing in the arms of the whole people of God.

I have fallen down and been so low that the gutter above me looked like a cliff,
and who picked me up? Followers of Jesus Christ.

I died, and I am not the same person I was before.

Thanks be to God, I have been resurrected into new life, into a living hope,
redeemed and resurrected by the power of love
entrusted to this significant congregation.

This is the only life I have to share and present and offer to the world.

Imperfect, flawed, filled with joy,

seeking daily

to practice the Christian faith and disciplines,

grateful for opportunities to serve and love

with integrity and sincerity and joy.

So when someone asks for proof of the resurrection, here it is.

Before you stands one who has been born again, from above.

You may wonder:

Does God forgive?

Does Jesus love me like the Bible says He does?

Does the Holy Spirit pray for you and yours?

Plead your case to God?

Empower you? Strengthen you? Comfort you with tender mercies?

My answer is going to be affirmative.

What is yours?

I believe because I have seen Jesus my Lord.

What do you believe?

Christ's love has been revealed to me through the living hopes who blessed me.

What is being revealed to you?

They say that Christianity has no grandchildren.

Each generation must learn the faith for itself;

each person must have his or her own faith encounter.

Here is to those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

“A woman was asked to serve her church by working with the youth of her congregation.

She thought the idea so completely absurd.

She had no experience in working with young people.

She suspected that she had few talents for this sort of ministry.

[However] she prayed about it and decided to overcome her doubts and her fears and do the best she could to work with the youth.

That was ten years ago.

The youth ministry that she created is famous all over her town as being a model of how youth ministry ought to be done.

“Funny,” she said to a friend, “those kids have strengthened my faith.

They have revealed Jesus to me in ways that I never could have imagined.

I have more faith now than I did at the beginning.

I simply went, did as I was told, and on my way, discovered the Jesus I never knew.”[2]

Are we living the faith as if we really believe in a living Christ?

Are you a living testament of a living God?

Are you a living hope of a Living Hope?

Annie Dillard, in her book Teaching a Stone to Talk

says that Christians conduct ourselves

as if we did not really understand the implications

of following a living, present, active God.

She writes that, "*On the whole,*

I do not find Christians sufficiently sensible of conditions.

Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke?

Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets,

mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.

It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church;

we should all be wearing crash helmets.

Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares;

they should lash us to our pews.

*For the sleeping god may wake one day and take offense."***[3]**

Who in your midst needs to be made aware of the presence of a hope that is awake and alive,

without any strings attached or preconditions?

The Living Hope of God is God!

The Living Hope of Christ is Christ!

The Living Hope of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit!

The living hope of the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is you.

In you

your family and friends and neighbors discover

that God has flesh and blood and scars and breath,

has an aroma, a scent, a fragrance,

and a warm, welcoming hand extended in love.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 39. No. 2. P. 24. Portions adapted for this sermon.

[2] Willimon, *Ibid.*

[3] Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters, NY. HarperPerennial. 1982. P. 58.