

Easter 2 “Born Again to a Living Hope” 1 Peter 1:3-9

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today’s Epistle reading is a natural opportunity for a sermon. The resurrection of Christ is not just about Him, it is of course about us too. We are the adopted children of God, promised an astounding inheritance which the entire world shall see on that Last Day. But now, while we wait, we are given a great joy. For though we have not seen him, we believe, we love him, and in that love and belief, we have an inexpressibly great joy.

Now this presents quite a contrast with what we experience here and now, but all that means is the joy we feel simply stands out all the more. That we are a people of hope is our best evangelistic tool. The joy we feel in Christ is contagious. This is the day to reflect on and live in our evangelistic hope.

Hope is good. In a book by John Ortberg (*If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001]), he cites medical research that studied men after they had had their first heart attack. It was based on the degree of hopefulness or pessimism. Twenty-one of the twenty-five most pessimistic men died within eight years. Only six of the most optimistic died in the same time period. Hope was a better predictor of death than such medical risk factors as high blood pressure and cholesterol level.

Mr. Ortberg adds a humorous twist to make the point that hope is good: “Better to eat Twinkies in hope than to eat broccoli in despair.”

What is hope? Hope is when you are struggling and you believe something better will happen. Hope is the expectation that something good will happen, something you have not seen or have happen yet. Hope is when you are holding out for a future that is rosier than what you are going through now.

When my brother was first diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, we hoped he would beat the odds and get better. We hoped that the medicine would work and destroy the cancer cells.

We hoped that exercise and diet would make a difference. He was given just a few months to live, and when he was placed in the clinical trial, we held out hope against hope that he would have more time with us. He did get more time...2 years to be exact. Hope is good when you are looking for a return to health.

When we hear of terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, we hope that peace will come to this battered world. We watch world leaders meet and hope that something good will happen for a change. We learn of a major terrorist arrested and we hope that the violence will be slowed down. Hope is good when you want bloodshed to stop.

When we turn on the news and our eyes are met with a bridge collapsing, we hope that people are not hurt or dead. We hope that rescue workers are successful in their searches. We hope that the bridges we travel over are sound and will not fall down. Hope is good when you are concerned about keeping people safe and out of danger.

Yes, hope is good, but deep inside we know that hopes die all too soon when the future is uncertain or what we hope for will only be temporary. My brother died of cancer two and a half years after that first diagnosis. Our good hopes were dashed when no more medicine could be given, when no more food could be eaten.

A lull in the war against terrorism is shattered by another bomb exploding, another plot uncovered, another day of soldiers killed. Mass shootings here in our schools, businesses and entertainment venues happen with increasing regularity. Our good hopes disappear when evil wins out over peace, when death takes innocent lives.

Deep inside we know the next disaster is soon to happen. A hurricane, tornado, plane crash, flood, tsunami, building collapse, earthquake—something will be the next breaking news story. Our good hopes for safety die just a bit more each day with each new catastrophe.

Now don't get me wrong here. Hope is good and we are not to give up hoping for health, safety, peace, and a better future. Those are good hopes. But they are also dying hopes because they are uncertain or will not last.

It is not hard to make a list of words that begin with the letter "D" that are words describing how these good hopes are dying hopes: discouragement, despair, disease, disaster, devil, disappointment, disobedience, depression, distance from God, detractors, and death. The last one is literally the ultimate killer of hope—death.

And yet, even when these good hopes die, we know there is a better hope that still lives. Against all dying hopes, we have one hope that lives deep inside of us. You can hear it in the apostle Peter's words. "Praise be to the God and Father." "Greatly rejoice." "An inexpressible and glorious joy." "Praise and honor." "New birth." "An inheritance that can never spoil, fade or perish." These first verses of Peter's letter shout hope—living hope—as he encourages his readers with the reason for the better hope that lives. God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

What is this better hope? Hope is when you are struggling and you believe something better will happen because Jesus will never leave you nor forsake you. He lives and guards the salvation that has been given to you. Hope is the expectation that something good will happen, something we have not seen or had happen yet.

No, we have not seen heaven yet. We have not experienced life after death. We have not had the last day resurrection from the dead that will empty all the cemeteries in the world. But that inheritance is kept in heaven for us. Hope is when you are holding on to a promised future that is rosier than what you are going through now. Even when good hopes die, we have within us a better hope, the hope of the resurrected Lord Jesus who lives for us, who lives within us, who lives to give us life, peace, and safety with Him that will never fade or die or disappear.

We look back to the first Easter morning when Jesus' tomb is empty. We see Mary Magdalene, whose hopes were dashed by Jesus' death on the cross, now holding on tightly to her risen Lord. Her hopes are alive again. She knows that even though death may kill **some** good hopes, she has her arms around the sure and certain hope, the eternal hope, and the hope for salvation that cannot be taken from her no matter what "D" word may invade her life.

And this same hope lives within us. Easter now brings a living hope. Easter is the New Year's Day of the soul. A day of hope for a brand-new year. A day pictured as a new baby, full of life and promise, walking in, while the old man of the last year walks away. The old and dying give way to the new and living. The resurrection of Jesus Christ brings new birth within us: it brings a faith that lives in the promise of something better kept in heaven for us. Because Jesus lives, our hope lives.

And you know what? The living hope makes even the dying hopes good. We hope for health because we believe that God's healing touch reaches into our lives today to give temporary reprieve from the disease and despair that invade our bodies, even as we await the permanent healing the Lord will deliver through the portal of death and His Second Coming. We hope for peace because we believe God works times of quiet and protection as a little bit of relief from the destruction and death of this violent world. We hope for safety because we believe God sends His guardian angels to defend us from so many times of disaster.

Yes, hope is good, but even when good hopes die, we have been given a new birth in Christ, a new birth of water and Spirit, of Word and Sacrament, of Confession and Absolution, a living hope in which we live each day empowered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

We died in baptism and were given a new life that day. That life is eternal and it is now. We don't start our eternal life sometime in the future, but it started on the day we were baptized. That life is not the life that dies on the day the world sees us die.

God has empowered a whole new life in His Son for us to live. The true joy of this faith is a joy lived in a relationship with God in which He is the Father and we are His children. As Pope John Paul II said, "Do not abandon yourselves to despair: We are the Easter people and Hallelujah is our song." Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Amen!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!