

The Ability to Hope

By: Penny Holste

April 8, 2012. Pastor Penny preaches this Easter morning on the ability to hope, and to expect that the good will overcome the evil.

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Quite a few Easters ago, when my sister invited us over to her house for dinner, and our nephews were pretty young, my cousin came too. And as she opened the door and entered the house, she said something to my sister — without realizing the age of the audience that would hear it. She said, "Oh, I think someone just ran over the Easter Bunny out there." Then she looked at my little five-year-old nephew's face and realized she shouldn't have said that. But it didn't matter to him, because he just squared his shoulders and looked at her and he said, "That wasn't *my* Easter Bunny. *My* Easter Bunny knows to look both ways." I think we see in children the ability to hope, and to expect that the good will overcome the evil.

It was a little harder for the women at the tomb on Easter morning, those two Marys and Salome. Maybe they were sort of the "extended family" of Jesus. Salome is thought to have been the mother of James and John, Jesus' disciples. And we hear that those three women were ones who provided for Jesus during his ministry in Galilee. So they were probably like his aunts, inviting him over to eat, and always pushing a little more food onto him, and listening with rapt attention to what he said and laughing at his jokes. They must have loved Jesus like their own sons. They had the courage to leave their safe little towns in Galilee and follow Jesus to the dangerous and big city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They were the ones that watched as events unfolded that week. And they saw the storm clouds brewing, and they saw Jesus arrested and put on trial and beaten and brutalized, and finally hung on the cross. And they were there when he hung on the cross. They were there to see the limp body taken down off the cross and put into a tomb for a grave. And when they rolled that stone in front of the tomb and it shut, they must have felt that was the end of hope. And so when the young man they saw in the tomb that morning told them that Jesus was alive, they couldn't believe it. They ran away in fear and told no one anything.

I don't think they have a corner on hopelessness. I think we have all felt it at times, maybe for days. Maybe weeks, maybe years. When hopelessness just seems to slither into our lives and curl around a dream or a plan, a hope that we had for ourselves or our families, and squeezes the life out of it, and we're left hopeless. I think we're probably all here this morning looking for something better, believing that there is something, somewhere, better than what we experience in this life. Something better for the world than tyrants and factions that kill each other. Something better for our country than gridlock in Washington and people without jobs and healthcare. And something better for us.

How many of us have, after a long week, just hoped for some respite, just reached out hoping that we could have some peace of mind, some certainty, some satisfaction in life, only to discover that fruit is elusive and we never quite get it. A friend said once she thought that Easter was a time of renewal. And she'd been reading about centering yourself and being present, and believed that if she could master the technique of feeling present in the moment, and work at it, little by little, that life would be better. But I don't know of anything that I've read or any skill that I can acquire that can change my heart. I know how to forgive; I just don't want to do it sometimes. And unless we change our hearts the world doesn't change, and there is no hope.

But Martin Luther said the cross, of all things, the cross of Jesus teaches us hope when there is no hope. And I think what he meant is that the cross is the greatest proof we have of God's love and the extent of God's love. The extent of Christ's love, who was willing to be crucified for us, who on the cross was like a magnet pulling all of the animosity and violence and failures and selfishness of the whole world onto himself. And it destroyed him. But it left us healed. What we could not do for ourselves — create hope — he has done. And all he asks then is that we receive it, accept it, believe it.

But even there we waver, don't we? It is so hard to believe, like the women wavered at the tomb. But the offer still stands. Jesus holds out his hands: "This is my gift for you." Once when he was on the cross he cried out, "It is finished." He meant more than his life. He meant the plan that God had created when sin came into the world, to rescue us, was just about complete. And on Easter morning it became complete. When Jesus was raised from the dead, that exchange with him was complete. His perfection for us. Our sins for him. In the Easter morning light, God looks at us and sees us as blameless.

Now that is hard to believe, isn't it? It's hard to grasp. It's hard to understand the resurrection. And there are those who call themselves Christians who don't believe in the resurrection, some of them scholars. There are several, I suppose. You can read many. John Dominic Crossan is one, and he thinks that when the disciples said they saw Jesus, what they really meant was that after Jesus' death they had a sense that they could live in a more loving way and they began to do so. Another scholar, Spong is his name, believes that when Peter said he saw Jesus alive, what Peter really meant was that he (and these are his words) "felt embraced by a sense of forgiveness and it forever changed his life." Yeah, those are easier things to understand, to interpret the resurrection psychologically. But really would you give your life for a feeling or a sense?

Because that's what these men did. Eleven of the twelve disciples, tradition tells us, gave their lives up because they wanted to tell the story of Jesus' resurrection. People saw him. People talked about it. It changed their lives. They began the Christian church. N. T. Wright is a scholar, and I think he has it right. He says really, the only rational way to explain what happened on Easter is to assume that they were right: they saw Jesus; he was alive. They felt him, touched him, saw him eat, they knew he was there. And because of that they knew for certain that God is stronger than their leaders, the Roman Empire, and even death. And that, and that alone, is what motivated them with the gift of the Holy Spirit to turn their lives around. Peter began preaching. Peter, who cowered before and denied Jesus. They found their voices. They believed it. And I think that the young man at the tomb knew that in not too long a time, the women too would believe him — which of course they did. Because he gave them an assignment that morning. He said go, go tell the disciples to go home to Galilee, because Jesus has gone there ahead of you. He's waiting for you with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the movie "No Country for Old Men" there is very little hope. If you've seen the movie, the villain, played by Javier Bardem, is an evil man. He's a hitman for drug runners, and there's nothing good to say about him. The law enforcement officer who's always trying to catch him and never quite does, played by Tommy Lee Jones, also seems to be a man without hope. Except there is this moment in the movie where Tommy Lee Jones tells his wife a dream that he had just had, a dream about his father, who also had been a law enforcement officer doing the same kind of work, but who had died some years earlier. He told his wife the dream took place in olden times. And he said, "I was on horseback going through a pass in the mountains at night. It was dark and it was cold and I was alone. But then suddenly I saw my father on horseback, and he was riding alongside me. And when I looked over, I saw he was holding a horn with a flame with fire." That's apparently how they transported fire from one place to another. And he said, "And without a word then, my father just went by and went out into the distance ahead of me." And he said, "In my dream, I knew what my father was doing. He was going to

build a fire. In the cold and the dark he would build a fire, and he would be there waiting for me when I got out of that pass. He would be there for me."

And that's really an image for our Easter hope — that however hopeless things seem to be, whatever we are experiencing, God is there alongside of us, reclaiming that experience for the good. And whatever we think might be out there in the future, God is there waiting for us, through this life and into the next, waiting to bless us so that we would work with him to bring the word of hope to others. This Easter may we accept that gift, may we believe that hope, and with it experience the freedom that comes — freedom, like walking out of a building after a long day at work or at school, walking out of the hospital after a long illness — and you step into the clear, clean air and sunshine like stepping out of a tomb into a new day, into a new life with Christ.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2012, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Penny Holste, Mark 16:1-8