

Rejoice in the Living Hope of the Resurrection

Friends,

Hope. We could all use some right now. Yes, it seems that our state has been “flattening the curve,” and the number of new cases is not increasing. But Covid-19 is now the number 1 cause of death in America. And there are so many questions about our future—how will we open up the economy without endangering many lives? And we ask, What about me and my family, and my job? Yes, we could use some hope.

Hope would help us fight off the current pandemic. That is, we would physically be better prepared for the illness. A counselor suggested making a “psychological preparation kit,” focusing on being calm, being active, and having hope—this will help. And not just now.

Years ago scientists studied 50 men who had just had their first heart attack, ranking how hopeful they were. Of the 25 most pessimistic men, 21 died within 8 years. Of the 25 optimistic men, only 6 died in that time. Hope was a better predictor of how long they would live than blood pressure or cholesterol level. The writer John Ortberg gave a silly conclusion: “Better to eat Twinkies with hope than to eat broccoli with despair.”

What is hope? Hope is when you are struggling, and you believe something better is coming. Hope is when you are holding out for a future that is rosier than things are now—and not just wishing it, not being “aspirational” as people like to say. Hope means you are certain that something better is on the horizon.

We want hope as we face this worldwide pandemic. But we needed hope before this coronavirus. We want hope when we hear that a loved one is fighting cancer. We hear a news report about a tornado hitting a town or a bridge collapsing or a terrorist attack and we say, I hope no one was hurt.

But in all those cases, we struggle because our hope is never certain. In fact, when we hear that someone has died, our hope can dry up. And we know that some month, some day, there will be another tornado, another attack, another illness spreading around. Our hope does not last.

But our God tells us through the Apostle Peter that we have a different hope. A certain hope. A permanent hope. **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”** And he goes on to say that we can therefore rejoice. Rejoice in the Living Hope of the Resurrection.

This living hope is not natural in mankind. We see that in our Gospel today. On Easter evening, Jesus showed himself alive to his disciples, appearing behind closed doors, proving that it was him, in the flesh. But one of the disciples wasn’t there. And when the others told Thomas that they’d seen Jesus, he wouldn’t believe it.

Do you ever wonder about Thomas? I mean, we can say that this was just too amazing—Thomas knew Jesus was dead on the cross and buried in a tomb, so how could he come alive? Our sinful nature wants to doubt that, saying it’s not scientifically possible. But this was Jesus,

whom Thomas had seen perform miracles. And wouldn't Thomas want to accept that Jesus had risen? How could he be so adamant that he would have to see Jesus himself?

Could it be that there was a part of Thomas that didn't want Jesus to be alive? A part that didn't want to have to depend completely on Jesus; a part of Thomas that was holding out that he, Thomas, could save himself?

You know how hard it can be to admit that you need help. You start to feel sick, but you shake it off—oh, it's just allergies, or I didn't sleep well. We avoid going to the doctor or the hospital, even now with this coronavirus going around, in part because getting help humbles us. It shows we're not able to take care of ourselves.

It's tough to admit that the help you need can only come from outside yourself.

It can be even tougher to admit that you need spiritual help. We don't want to admit that we have a real problem. Oh, I've got a few sins, yes, but I can fix it; just change my habits. We view it like a computer virus—just get the right anti-virus installed and running, and the computer can get cleaned up.

But sin is not just a little thing. Sin is completely destructive. It drags us away from God, and sets us on the road to hell. Our sins had to be paid in blood. Our sinful nature has to be put to death, and we need to start over.

But this is what our God has done. He sent Jesus to pay for our sins. And then, **“in his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus.”** In Holy Baptism, your sinful nature was drowned and buried; and a new person arose, made new with the holiness of Jesus. That's why Baptism is called a washing of rebirth; as Jesus said, we are born again of water and the Spirit.

Easter has been called the New Year's Day of the soul. You know that picture of New Year's, with the old, decrepit year hobbling off, and the new year pictured as a little baby, ready to grow and do so much? That's what Easter assures us of. Our old self was buried in the tomb with Jesus; a new person has arisen, like a new baby, with a whole life ahead of us. A life filled with hope for the future.

This Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, was traditionally called Quasimodogeniti Sunday. That's a big Latin word meaning “like a baby.” It's taken from words Peter later wrote, about how we are like newborn babes, growing in our faith. The reason they called this Sunday Quasimodogeniti is that, in the ancient Church, many Christians were baptized on Easter Sunday. And now, as they gathered a week later, like newborn babes, they were ready to grow in Christian faith and living.

This is how we can all view ourselves. We have a **“new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus.”**

This is not an uncertain hope. Our hope for the future is as certain as Jesus' rising from the grave. It is not a dying hope. It is a hope that is alive with the life of Christ. Hope is the certainty that things are going to be better.

Peter says we have **“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation...to be revealed in the last time.”** Because Jesus rose from the grave, we know that there is a home waiting for each one of us—a home with riches that will not wear out. That starts with our bodies. On Judgment Day, we will be raised, and our bodies will

be glorified, so they will not get sick, they will not get injured, they will not hurt at all. And we will live on a glorified new earth, along with all of God's people, for eternity.

And until our Savior takes us home, he promises to "shield" us, to protect us, with his almighty power.

For until we leave this earth, we will face times of testing. A pastor suggested that this might be something Jesus was referring to when he showed his disciples his hands—with the scars from the nails still there. Yes, that proved it was really Jesus. But it also was a reminder, even after Easter, of the trials he had gone through, and the trials we will have to face. Peter says, **"for a little while you may have...to suffer grief in all kinds of trials."**

But our God has given us so many promises about our troubles. He says that there will be real tests, but he will only allow as much trouble as he knows we can handle. He says that these will come **"for a little while."** He also promises that these will work for our good—such as, by building up our perseverance and character—and our hope.

And finally God promises that whatever pain we face now can't compare to the glories that await us in heaven. And he promises to bless us now and eternally. Jesus once had said to Peter, **"No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."**

Peter says that our faith will stand up through all the trials we face, even more than any metal tempered in a fire. And that strong faith will end in God being praised when we are brought to our heavenly home.

So what does Peter tell us to do? "Rejoice"! The more we focus on Jesus Christ risen from the dead, the more we remember our own forgiveness and coming resurrection, the more we will be filled with joy. Our complaining and envy will fade away, because we know that we have a treasure that will never fade stored up in our true home.

And that living hope of the resurrection gives us hope in all circumstances. When we are sick, we can be certain that God loves us, and if it is his will, he will give us temporary healing from our illness. If we lose our job, we know our God is watching over us and will give us our daily bread. And even when our world faces a pandemic, we have hope, not because someday scientists will find a vaccine; we have hope because the God who raised Jesus from the dead is with us and he will see us through to our home at his side.

So, rejoice. Rejoice in the living hope of the resurrection. Amen.

"Though you have not seen [Jesus,] you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." Amen.