

“A LIVING HOPE”

1 Peter 1:3-9

I suppose it's always been the same, really, but watching, reading or listening to the news these days is a depressing experience. We live, it seems, in a world with very little hope. Wherever we look there is violence – state violence, terrorism, criminal violence: violence that wrecks and ends lives, destroys communities and distorts relationships. There is abuse of every kind against individuals and against communities. There is corruption at every level, with men and women desperate to increase their wealth or possessions or privileges. The weakest and most vulnerable go to the wall in order to preserve the differential between the richest and the poorest – much of which we perhaps don't notice as many of us actually benefit from it. It's a very bleak outlook and for many there is little sense of hope about the future – immediate or long-term. Woody Allen summed it up a few years back now when he wrote: *“More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”*

We may find that's true of our own lives too. Just in terms of what's happening in our own little worlds, the outlook seems bleak. Maybe it's a health issue. Maybe it's financial or to do with work. Maybe it's a relationship that has just got really messy and that's affecting your view of the future. Maybe it's to do with family or neighbours or colleagues. But you can't see much hope for the future.

We live in a messy world, don't we? It's not that the world around us is evil, as such – after all, God made it good and God still loves it. It's just that evil has somehow sneaked in and everything's got broken. We live in a broken world and we just can't seem to work out how anything is going to improve – for ourselves or for anyone else.

The good news of Christianity, though, is that there is hope. That's why we're worshipping here today. That's why Peter bursts out in praise in the words we've just read: *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!”* Remember, this is the Peter whom we read about in Matthew's Gospel last week, the Peter who denied ever having had anything to do with Jesus as he watched him apparently defeated and destroyed by the Jewish leaders and Roman military. What has restored Peter's trust and hope in God? Well, he goes on to tell us here.

God shows us mercy. God looks at this broken world and all those who are struggling to cope within it and offers us a way to deal with it all. He gives us as humanity a means to escape the consequences of all this mess that we've made, and gives us as individuals a glimpse of what life could be like through the ministry and mission of his Son Jesus and through the words of the Bible. He has made a promise to us that this world can and will be mended – his sovereign rule will be re-established and his Kingdom will

eventually come to fulfilment. This is not all there is! And once we manage to grasp that, once we are prepared to take that step of faith and believe that God's got it sorted, we end up with a new outlook on life, a new attitude, a new start. In fact, it's just like being reborn, born all over again: "*a new birth*" as Peter puts it here.

And that allows us to have a real hope, a "*living hope*", to see the world and the future through a less pessimistic lens. This is not all there is: there is a positive future out there, a future that is not broken, but remade, remodelled, restored – just as God wants it to be. As you have probably heard before, if not from me, then from some other source, this hope of which Peter writes here and which peppers the writings of St Paul as well, is not that vague hope that we sometimes express that it might be sunny tomorrow or things might start to pick up again at work or it might all be OK at the doctor next week. This living hope is a positive, strong hope – it's a wholehearted knowledge that things are definitely going to get better. It's a hope that will never be disappointed.

And that was pretty ground-breaking stuff in the Ancient World. No other religion, no other philosophy offered hope. In the article on "*Hope*" in the big theological Greek dictionary, it says this: "*Living hope as a fundamental religious attitude was unknown in Greek culture ... In the final analysis men had to stand without hope before the hostile forces of sin and death*" – as many people choose to stand today, rather than accept what God has to offer them. For them, you lived your life, tried to do your best in a very difficult situation, then you died and that was that. There wasn't a great deal of point to life, as they saw it. But along came the Christians, with their living hope and their new outlook and their positive attitude, and suddenly there was a viable alternative.

Viable and positive and radical because God guaranteed this hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, as Peter tells us here. Our hope is predicated on the resurrection and that's therefore what is at the very heart of our faith. This is how Paul puts it in *1 Corinthians 15:14* – "*If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*" Again, just a couple of sentences later, he writes, "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*" In other words, without the resurrection, there's no way of guaranteeing that this broken world will ever get mended and you've got no hope of a brighter future for yourselves either.

And this is probably the point in many sermons this morning where preachers and pastors and apologists and evangelists will start to try and show that the resurrection actually happened, marshalling arguments and sifting evidence and using science and forensics, quoting from books with titles like *The Evidence for the Resurrection* and so on. People will be equipped to win arguments with agnostics and debate with

doubters. But Peter isn't interested in whether the resurrection happened – nor, indeed, how it happened – he wants everyone to know *why* it happened.

And that's what should excite us, too. You can get the arguments and the evidence and the proofs out of a book. But the reason for it, you can experience that in your own life. You can know this hope and live in the light of it. The resurrection happened in order to show that this world can be transformed, *will* be transformed – and our lives within it can be transformed. The old paradigm of hopeless despair and apathy has been swept away and now we see that there is “*a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus the Christ.*” This is how Eugene Peterson translates these words in *The Message*: “*Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand new life and have everything to live for.*”

You see, Easter means that things are different. Things could never be the same again after Easter. This is not all here is – a few decades traipsing through this vale of tears and then oblivion. There is a bright future because God is in charge and God is at work and he has shown that by bringing Jesus through death and out the other side. If he can do that, then there is nothing he cannot do. His Kingdom is coming. His will is being done. His original plan for creation and for humanity within it is starting to hum with life again. Violence, abuse, corruption, injustice – they're having their last fling because God's setting things to right. Don't lose hope. Don't despair. Don't give up.

And it's not just for now. It's not like a bit of regime change that will smooth things over for a while. This is something that will endure, that stretches off into the eternal future. If the resurrection just meant that we can have a few years without worry, that would be nice, but it wouldn't really change that much in the long run. It wouldn't lead to that “*new birth into a living hope*” and, as Peter goes on, “*an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade*”. Indeed, as Paul says in the great chapter in *I Corinthians* from which we've already quoted, “*If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*” This is all about our eternal destiny, our ongoing life with God, our never-ending experience of his amazing Kingdom.

If you hang on to nothing else this Easter, hang on to this. After you've put the Easter cards away and eaten all the chocolate, when you've gone back to work or school or college, when life returns to its usual routines and programmes, remember this: “*God, in his great mercy, has given you new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus the Christ.*” There *IS* hope – and God wants you to have it!

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We live in a broken world and we just can't seem to work out how anything is going to improve – for ourselves or for anyone else. The good news of Christianity, though, is that there is hope. That's why Peter bursts out in praise: "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!*" After his experience of Good Friday, what has restored Peter's trust and hope in God?

God shows us mercy. God looks at this broken world and all those who are struggling to cope within it and offers us a way to deal with it all. He has made a promise to us that this world can and will be mended – his sovereign rule will be re-established and his Kingdom will eventually come to fulfilment. This is not all there is! And once we manage to grasp that, once we are prepared to take that step of faith and believe that God's got it sorted, we end up with a new outlook on life, a new attitude, a new start. In fact, it's just like being reborn, born all over again: "*a new birth*" as Peter puts it here.

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In the Ancient World, no other religion, no other philosophy offered hope. But along came the Christians, with their living hope and their new outlook and their positive attitude, and suddenly there was a viable alternative, because God guaranteed this hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is at the very heart of our faith. (Look at *1 Corinthians 15:14,17*.) Without the resurrection, there's no way of guaranteeing that this broken world will ever get mended and you've got no hope of a brighter future for yourselves either.

Peter isn't interested in **whether** the resurrection happened – nor, indeed, **how** it happened – he wants everyone to know **why** it happened. It happened in order to show that this world can be transformed, **will** be transformed – and our lives within it can be transformed. The old paradigm of hopeless despair and apathy has been swept away and now we see that there is "*a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus the Christ*." Easter means that things are different. Things could never be the same again after Easter. There is a bright future because God is in charge and God is at work and he has shown that by bringing Jesus through death and out the other side. If he can do that, then there is nothing he cannot do. His Kingdom is coming. His will is being done. This is something that will endure, that stretches off into the eternal future. (Look at *1 Corinthians 14:19*.) There **IS** hope – and God wants you to have it!

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think the world seems so hopeless to many people? Is there anything that makes you despair?
2. What do you understand by "*God's mercy*"? How have you experienced it in your own life?
3. Why is hope so important for people? How can we communicate the Christian hope to those who have no hope?
4. Why is the resurrection so central to our faith?
5. What is more important to you – **whether** the resurrection happened or **why** the resurrection happened? Why?
6. Is there anything that has particularly struck you about this passage? What will you do about it?