

**Sermon- Providence UMC May 8, 2011 3rd Sunday of Easter**  
**“Is Hope still alive among us?” 1 Peter 1:17-24**  
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We are in the season of Easter. We are moving toward Pentecost which was an experience that transformed the people of faith following the resurrection from passive to active participants in ministry. Today is Mother’s Day although not a religious holiday, one that we recognize as we consider the important role that our mother’s play in our lives and the life of the family and certainly the church. During the time following Easter, we walk each week in the path of the 1<sup>st</sup> disciples trying to understand what the resurrection of Jesus now centuries later for us means for our lives today. Last week we discovered through Thomas that the journey of faith often includes moments of doubt. We saw also the confirmation of 15 of our youth as we celebrated the moment in the life of the church where one generation passes the faith onto another generation. This week we will use Peter’s epistle as we look at the nature of Hope for a people called Christians.

Peter writes: “You were ransomed...with the precious blood of Jesus...through him you have come to trust God...so that your faith and hope are set on God.”

Ken outlined for us last week the thinking of post-modernity. In a post-modern world of today we find ourselves wanting to experience faith in order for us to be claimed by its truth. This approach to understanding the faith is contra to a modern approach, which is arrived at through analysis and rational argument arriving at a logically thought out understanding of our faith, which then forms our basis of accepting its truth. In the post-modern world of today we see the unchurched wanting to experience an outreach of the church in some form before they become a part of the community of faith.

In a world in which there are so many who claim to know the truth, the experiential approach becomes a plausible way to discern a truth that words may distort. It reminds me of an ole saying, “Your actions speak so loudly, that I cannot hear what you are saying.” We live in a world where we want to discern if something is true at a level beyond just words.

So this week in our readings we have 3 types of witnesses that I think help us to interpret what we are experiencing about God and God’s ways on our life journey. In the first epistle of Peter he is reminding the early disciples who they are. He reminds them by relating through the Jewish context from which he and most of them have come. He says, “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors...’ They started out refugees from a time of slavery in Egypt. They received laws and rituals that were intended to liberate them from the bondage they knew and draw them into a lifestyle that would lead them closer to God and each other. But instead the law became an idol and its practices were leading its followers away from what was intended by God. So he says, ‘you were ransomed with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.’ In the Exodus experience this language speaks of a time when many were saved from a random plague by marking their doors with the blood of a

paschal lamb. The cloud of death passed over those whose doors were so marked. It was simple act of grace. It was a gift God gave based on God's love for them and God's Presence. So Peter claims that same act of grace for the bloodied cross. God has given another gift to you through the suffering of Christ. By believing on him, we then receive a gift that ransoms us from a life that is futile to one that leads to life and a relationship with the living God.

Peterson translates this part of Peter's letter this way: 'Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God. It cost God plenty to get you out of the dead-end, empty headed life you grew up in. He paid with Christ's sacred blood.' Peterson is trying to make the analogy clearer that your ancestors trusted God and put the lamb's blood on their doors. You have witnessed the death of Jesus and his resurrection. Both of these experiences are ransoms that lead us to trust God. Why? Because God loves you and wants a relationship with you. To what end, we ask? So that through you the abundant life that has been promised by God throughout history may be lived by you now and be seen by others through your witness, which will hopefully allow them to believe and to trust God. Later in Chapter 3 of Peter's letter, he writes, 'always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.' This is the hope and peace in our hearts that the world can neither give nor take away. It comes as a by-product of trusting God as we journey together through our lifetime. Hope is best seen and understood in the context of the particular, for example living through 9/11 or a family crisis and what we experience in that process.

Examples of this post resurrection hope are seen in 2 other readings. 1<sup>st</sup> in Acts we see the scene from the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection in Jerusalem. Peter is standing and addressing a crowd in that city in the morning as he witnesses to his belief that Jesus is Lord. He invites all who hear him to trust God enough to accept Jesus as their Lord; to repent from their old lifestyles and to turn to living lives 'that are God conscious' (using Peterson's phrase). Think about this scene. This is the same man who just 50 days before denied that he knew Jesus 3 times. Why? He feared that he too would be arrested and crucified. And now 50 days later he stands up in public in the same city and declares his faith in defiance of any law or group who may oppose him or those following Jesus. How did this happen? What changed him? We can only assume that it was his experience with the Risen Christ. The resurrection experience where Peter went to an empty tomb and was confronted by the Resurrected Christ not in Judgment but in Love. Jesus' words in John's Gospel to Peter were 'do you love me...Feed my sheep.' Scripture continues to assure us that our relationship with this God of the Resurrection, much like our relationship with our moms, is one rooted in love. But not rooted in our loving God as much as God loving us. Somehow when we experience this unconditional, unmerited love, it changes us. It is this experience that opens our eyes to who Christ is. It is this experience when accepted into our hearts and minds that transforms our journeys in life into ones where we want to share this love with others. It becomes a source of hope in our lives.

Henri Nouwen, in his book Turning my Mourning into Dancing, described hope in these words: "Hope is willing to leave unanswered questions unanswered and

unknown futures unknown. Hope makes you see God's guiding hand not only in gentle and pleasant moments but also in the shadows of disappointment and darkness...Hope...implies a desire for fulfillment, which may include some fear and anxiety."

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and final scene of this week's post Easter experience which helps us understand God's ways, perhaps a bit better, is the familiar Road to Emmaus story in Luke's Gospel. Two disciples who have witnessed the crucifixion and are headed away from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are confused by the turn of events and heart-broken. They talk about their disappointment in the events and how they had placed their hope in Jesus being the Messiah and now he is gone. Not only that but they were saddened by the way he suffered on the cross. As they talk, they are joined by a 3<sup>rd</sup> person who is traveling along the same road. He listens and then enters into the conversation but argues that the suffering served a purpose and links it to the Suffering Servant images from the prophet Isaiah. This is something for them to ponder as they will continue to try to make sense of what this event means for their lives. As they near their destination, the stranger indicates that he will continue on but the two disciples invite him to stop and have a meal with them. He agrees and it was in the breaking of the bread as the meal began and the words that this man used in doing so that caused them to recognize who this stranger was. And then he was gone.

The Emmaus Road experience speaks to us on many levels, but on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, I want to suggest that it speaks to the hope that we know in our journey of faith. In the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus promises his disciples before the crucifixion that he will not abandon them. Then here in Luke just hours after the resurrection, his promise is fulfilled and experienced by 2 of his disciples. But they, like us, did not recognize this moment for what it was until some time had passed and until they needed it. It was upon reflection. It was as they thought about the experience with him, how he spoke with them, how their minds and hearts felt, and then they realized his Presence.

I want to suggest to us that this Presence of the Living Lord continues to this day. The burdens and anxieties, the challenges and the ups and downs of life are with us yet. We were never promised that temptations and suffering would be removed from our lives when we join ranks with the community of believers in Jesus Christ. But we are promised that we will not face them **alone**. It is in the moment of the suffering, the temptation, the crosses that we bear that we then see, experience, and feel His Presence with us yet. It is a peace that the world cannot give, nor take away...it is a love for us that we know is unmerited and never ending, and always there for us.

I want to suggest to us this morning that the Hope of Easter is based in the Presence of the Resurrected Lord, who loves us with a love that knows no bounds and from which we discover meaning, hope and joy for our lives. It is known best in a community of faith where we learn to love one another as He first loved us.

So as we witness the absolute destruction of tornadoes that have swept across our land; of earthquakes that endanger futures and raise questions about livability of parts of our planet; as we consider fears of unknown threats that we cannot control or change; even as we experience moments of justice delivered and we may be tempted to cling to its tangible results; we need to remind ourselves that we have been here before. Our ancestors before us and the first disciples faced all the same fears and challenges; the founders of our country faced the same or similar fears; and, those who have faced the threat of war and economic upheaval before us. And they discovered, as will we with patience and perseverance, that OUR HOPE is based in Christ our Lord, who is the resurrected One. His Presence is with us now as it will be during times of hardship and storms yet to be. And like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus our hearts burn with hope when we trust the God of the Resurrection. And like Peter we are reminded that we have been ransomed by a God whose love for us is beyond our understanding and that our peace rests in the knowledge that God is with us. God will lead us through the storms of life... and we need to travel with a deep consciousness of God and a deep trust in God. Our Hope is in the God of the Easter Experience!

Christ promised in the Gospel of John.. 'my joy is in you so that your joy may be complete.' And St Paul writes in Galatians, 'the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me.'(gal.2:20)

May it be so with us.