

Finding Hope

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Thomas Sunday
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Psalm 118:14 – 21
Acts 5:27 – 32
Revelation 1:4 – 8
John 20:19 – 31

Text: “Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.’” – John 20:27

Thomas had lost all hope... His good friend, prophet, and spiritual leader, Jesus, had just been killed in a gruesome way, on a Friday, just a little more than a week ago. Everyone, in today's modern world, calls it Good Friday. But for Thomas, it was a very, very Bad Friday. And that first Easter was not any better for Thomas; it meant nothing to Thomas because he was not in that locked room with the other disciples to see the resurrected Jesus. Thomas had lost all hope.

You've heard the famous first Corinthians 13 passage about faith, hope and love, where Paul writes that the greatest of these three is love. We talk a lot about love, but today I want to talk about hope – and how to get back, how to find it again, when it seems to have vacated your life.

If a person loses hope, unless you can help that person get it back, all is lost. One thing I can tell you is that hope is an emotion that springs from the heart, not the brain. Hope lays dormant until it's amazing strength is beckoned, supplying a sheer belief that you will overcome, you will persevere, and you will endure anything and everything that comes your way.

So, what is hope?

Hope is the belief that circumstances will get better. It's not just a wish for things to get better – it's the actual belief, the knowledge, that things will get better, no matter how big or small the obstacle.

- Hope is the steadfast determination of the cancer patient who fights, believing that eventually a cure will come.
- It's the belief that at age 55, after a disaster where you've lost your home, your car, your possessions -- everything material, that you still have your health and family, and that you can, and you will start over.

- It is the person's belief, when the person has lost their job and has a family to support, that new employment is just around the corner, as long as the person keeps looking.

Sometimes hope looks so bleak in a given situation as to appear non-existent, yet is so vital for survival, that virtually everyone who survives a life-threatening ordeal – that on the surface seems impossible – will point to hope as the one thing that got them through. It is this very hope which champions the survivor, even in the bleakest of times.

If I could find a way to package and dispense hope, I would have a pill more powerful than any anti-depressant on the market. Hope is often the only thing standing between a person and a great abyss. As long as a patient, individual or victim has hope, they can recover from anything and everything.

Let's go back 2000 years – to the time when Jesus felt abandoned. Our human-made (but God inspired) Bibles talk about this feeling Jesus had while he was near death on the cross. Mark chapter 15, verse 34, says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew chapter 27, verse 46 says the exact same thing. These English language words are a translation from the Aramic dialect, one of the languages commonly spoken in the Holy Land in Jesus' day. They were supposed to reveal how deeply Jesus felt about abandonment by God. I am not so sure that the English words really tell the depth of emotion. Don't forget that Jesus, while having divine heritage, was as human (in his feelings and emotions) as you and I are. And, I think Jesus may have, in my opinion, felt the deeper human emotion of hopelessness.

Perhaps the original Aramic dialect words do a better job at expressing what is happening in Jesus' human heart. You can find the words in your NRSV Bible:

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus is quoting directly from ancient words that you and I can also find at the beginning of Psalm 22 in the Old Testament. Psalm 22 is an anguished prayer of David as a godly sufferer victimized by the vicious and prolonged attacks of enemies, and the Lord has not yet provided deliverance.

The front of today's bulletin has a quote that is worth pondering. "The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease." It was said by William Osler, co-founder of Johns Hopkins Hospital. For many of you who have found yourself or a loved one in a very difficult medical situation, you probably know where I am going with this. Particularly if the health struggle has been a serious and difficult one. Hope is all but lost. And then, along comes a doctor who seems to have found a miracle cure. All of a sudden, all of sudden, it feels like you have heard the most hopeful news in years.

Sometimes I like to study a certain topic in different versions of the Bible, because sometimes a specific version will do a better job with the "words." One example is on the subject of hope, and it comes from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Romans chapter 15,

verse 13. In my opinion, this verse from the Good News version beats what is in the NRSV. The Good News version of Romans chapter 15, verse 13, says, "May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in God, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit." The NRSV version is not quite as explicit about God being the "source of hope." And sometimes, we need the words to be explicitly in front of us, or we just don't get it.

For Jesus, that "source of hope" moment came from God after his physical death on the cross. For Thomas, that "source of hope" moment came when the resurrected Jesus stood among the disciples about a week later. It came right when Thomas needed Jesus the most. In today's gospel reading Jesus said, "Peace be with you." Then Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side." Thomas cried out, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus, the great physician, recognized the depth of Thomas' emotion, and just as a great physician would do, Jesus treated the whole patient.

Scholars don't know much about what happened to Thomas. He showed up one more time in the book of Acts. I would like to believe, however, that Thomas went onward providing hope to many others – following the example that Jesus the Christ had showed him.

While you may think you don't have any special powers to bring hope, you have more than you think. You have a full life of experiences, and that is all you need. There may be a friend, a relative or a new acquaintance who is in need of a "hopeful moment." Be that extension of God, be the physician, be that "source of hope" moment with your attention, your actions, or just your kind words. Follow the example that Jesus showed to Thomas – Help someone to find the hope that they seem to have lost. And you'll find, it will be good for both of you.

Amen.