

SERMON TITLE: "A Living Hope"  
SERMON TEXT: John 20:26-29 and 1 Peter 1:3-9  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: April 14, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

There's an old story about a school district in a large city. The school district *had a program to help children keep up with their schoolwork during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular [student]. She took the [boy's] name and room number and talked briefly with [his] regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in this class now," the teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them, so he doesn't fall too far behind."*

*The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left, she felt she hadn't accomplished much.*

*But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. [Now] he's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."*

As a sick third grader, the boy didn't have the ability to articulate what was going on in his mind and emotions. But some years later, as a teenager, he was able to *explain that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "[If I were dying,] they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs . . . , would they?"*<sup>1</sup> The visiting teacher had given the boy a living hope.

## **1—GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD**

Fortunately, we don't have to be in a hospital nearly dying to discover that we have a living hope. First Peter 1:3 tells us that we all can have a living hope because God raised Jesus from the dead. The good news of Easter is that Jesus' death was not the end of the story. After Jesus was crucified and placed in the tomb, God raised him to resurrection life. The gospels tell us that the disciples saw Jesus and spoke with him. Even doubting Thomas came to believe.

The Christian faith revolves around this living hope that God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is our example, our forerunner, the pioneer of our faith. He is the firstborn from the dead. He is our symbol and source of confidence. The resurrection of Jesus is God's signature on the promise that we too will someday be raised to life eternal.

I like the story told by Rev. James DeLoach of Second Baptist Church of Houston. Rev. DeLoach told his congregation about a painting *of an old burned-out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney . . . the charred debris of what had been that family's sole possession. In front of this destroyed home [was] an old grandfather[ly]-looking man dressed only in his [long johns standing next to] a small boy clutching a pair of patched overalls. It was evident that the child was crying. Beneath the picture were the words which the artist felt the old man was speaking to the boy. They were simple words, yet they presented a profound theology and philosophy of life. Those words were, "Hush, child, God ain't dead!"*<sup>2</sup>

We might barely escape, and all we possess may be taken from us. But we can still have a living hope, because God raised Jesus from the dead.

## **2—INHERITANCE THAT IS IMPERISHABLE, UNDEFILED, AND UNFADING**

In First Peter 1:4, we discover a second reason for our living hope. As Christians, we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. This was an important message to the early Christians who first read this scripture letter. Being a Christian in those days was no easy

thing. Usually, they were converts from Judaism or from one of the polytheistic religions of the Romans and Greeks. When they became Christians, they had to turn aside from their families, their neighbors, and their friends. At the very least, they were cut off from normal relationships and subject to ridicule. Sometimes the taunts turned into physical abuse. Christians of the first century suffered and were sometimes even martyred for their choice of faith. Their existence was tenuous. That's why it was such good news that their hope was not fleeting.

I heard in the news this week that Costco has been selling gold bars. Apparently, the company started offering 24-karat gold bars last fall and has been selling between \$100 and \$200 million worth per month. The idea is that gold is virtually indestructible and will retain its value.

But First Peter says that an even more-certain investment than gold is the inheritance of Christians that will never run out or disappear. The promise of eternal life isn't a pie-in-the-sky pipe dream. To switch to the words of Jesus in Matthew 6—our treasure is in heaven, where moth and rust cannot destroy, and where thieves cannot break in and steal. Or to use the imagery of Isaiah 40—our physical bodies are like grass that withers and flowers that fade, but our confidence is in God, whose word endures forever.

When we're laid off from work, when we're faced with debilitating pain, when we struggle with family problems, when our application is rejected, when our spiritual well has run dry, when we're caught in a financial crisis, when our spouse wants a divorce, when we get hit by the straw that breaks the camel's back—that's when it's good to remember that we have an inheritance that never diminishes or disappears.

"Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come. But grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."<sup>3</sup> As Christians, we have something even better than gold. We have a gracious inheritance, a living hope that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

### **3—INDESCRIBABLE AND GLORIOUS JOY**

In First Peter 1:8-9, we see a third reason for our living hope. As Christians, we're filled with indescribable and glorious joy. Although our salvation will be complete only when we see Jesus in heaven, by loving him and believing in him now, we're already receiving the joyous salvation of our souls.

As we experienced last Sunday, it's tradition in some Christian circles to celebrate the Sunday after Easter as a day of joyful humor. The idea is that that, by raising Jesus from the dead, God played a practical joke, and we should all enjoy the fun. In other times and places, Easter joy has been celebrated in other ways. In the 1980s, when I lived in Buffalo, New York, I learned about some Polish Catholic traditions. The Polish Catholics would buy their Easter hams and take them to the church for the priest to bless the hams on Saturday before they cooked and ate them for Easter dinner. Then on Easter Monday, which they called Dyngus Day, the Polish Catholics would meet at the church hall again for lively polka dancing. Their festivities were a happy celebration of the new life that comes with spring and Easter. Easter held far too much joy to be contained in just one day of worship. The glorious joy of resurrection was worthy of several days of celebration.

Pope John Paul II once said, "If we are silent about the joy that comes from knowing Jesus, the very stones will cry out! For we are an Easter people, and 'Alleluia' is our song. Rejoice because Jesus has come into the world! Rejoice because Jesus has died upon the cross! Rejoice because [Jesus] rose again from the dead! Rejoice because Jesus has come to set us free!"<sup>4</sup>

A hymn I learned years ago tells of the indescribable and glorious joy of our living hope. It goes like this:

I have found the pleasure I once craved;  
it is joy and peace within.  
What a wondrous blessing! I am saved  
from the awful gulf of sin.  
I have found the joy no tongue can tell.  
How its waves of glory roll!

It is like a great o'er-flowing well  
 springing up within my soul.  
 It is joy unspeakable and full of glory,  
 full of glory, full of glory.  
 It is joy unspeakable and full of glory.  
 Oh, the half has never yet been told!<sup>5</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

There's a story about *a man [who] approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing—we're behind."*

"Ohhh," said the man. "They're killing you. *I'll bet you're discouraged.*"

"*Why should we be discouraged?*" replied the boy. "*We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!*"<sup>6</sup>

As a Little League baseball player, the boy knew that there were lots more innings yet to come.

As Christians, we know that God raised Jesus from the dead. No matter how bad the score might look right now, we know we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. With that assurance of our salvation, we can't help but have an indescribable and glorious joy. And that's what it means to have a living hope!

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<sup>1</sup>[www.sermonillustrations.com/hope](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/hope)—*Bits & Pieces*, July 1991.

<sup>2</sup>[www.sermonillustrations.com/hope](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/hope)—Quoted in *When God Was Taken Captive* by W. Aldrich, Multnomah, 1989, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>"Amazing Grace" by John Newton, 1779.

<sup>4</sup>Cal & Rose Samra, *Holy Humor* (Guideposts: New York, 1996), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup>"Joy Unspeakable" by B. E. Warren, 1900.

<sup>6</sup>[www.sermonillustrations.com/hope](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/hope)—original source unknown. Words in italics are quoted from website. The rest is my adaptation.