



John 20:1-8
Believe
Hopeful

Rev. Brian North
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Resurrection Day (Easter)

Many of you know that my youngest daughter is really into ballet. And when you're a parent, even if you don't naturally take an interest in something, if your *kids* do: you dive in with them. I mean, if one of my kids becomes a country musician I'll even start listening to country music. So because my daughter is in to ballet, I take opportunities that come my way to learn more about it. This last week, I saw an article in the Seattle Times about the "Dance Theater of Harlem." 10 years go I would have passed it over. It was an article on this ballet company and its associated ballet school from Harlem, and their mission to help non-Caucasians see ballet as something they can do as well, because ballet is often perceived as for white people. One of the ballerinas they interviewed – a Hispanic gal who grew up here in the Seattle area, in fact – said, **"I think people think of ballet as something that belongs to somebody else, something very fancy and not essential," she said. "But it is essential to a good life to see something that lifts them up, and transports them."**ⁱ And so she's saying that ballet does that: it lifts us up, it transports us out of our hardships and into this other realm when you watch it, and I'm sure even more so for those who are actually dancing.

I think sometimes we see "hope" in much the same way. It's something that "belongs to somebody else" such as: people who are down and out; who are sick; heart-broken, poverty stricken, and so forth. We see hope as being for them...but for us, it's not essential. And yet, all of us will face serious hardships at various times in our lives where we desperately hope for a different outcome than what we seem to be headed for. Hope doesn't belong "to somebody else" at all. It belongs to all of us.

And: **Today we celebrate the greatest hope-giving event in history: the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** It's the event that is God's promise that there are no dead ends; that the end is *not* the end. Sometimes, even in situations that are really difficult – maybe even seem hopeless to some – sometimes in those situations we have hope and hardly even realize it, as though hope is just innate in us. It's not something we're always conscious about – Like the 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.” “Wow,” said the spectator, “I'll bet you're discouraged.” “Why should I be discouraged?” replied the little boy.ⁱⁱ “We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!” That boy has an innate sense of hope, right? If the other team scored that many, so can we! And sometimes we're that way.

Other times, however, we very much are conscious about the circumstances we find ourselves in and the need for hope in our lives: when the job ends and don't know where our next employment will be; when a relationship that you've invested a lot of time, emotion, and energy in heads south; when you turn in that paper for a class that can make or break your grade.

And in all these kinds of difficult situations, Jesus gives us hope. And it's a hope that is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus, where the ultimate hardship and difficulty has been overcome. In the series of messages we're in right now, we have a different statement of belief each week that is rooted in Scripture and crystallizes for us what we believe about the theme for that day. Today's is: **“I can cope with the hardships of life because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.”** We can say this with confidence because of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus gives us hope in life and in death: that whatever difficulties we may face, God can work in that situation and bring us through it to something on the other side that is even more glorious than we could possibly have imagined. And it's the resurrection of Jesus that gives us this hope and makes us hope-filled people.

Now, we need to hit the pause button for a moment, and ask a question: **Is the resurrection of Jesus real?** Paul acknowledges in 1 Corinthians 15 that if the resurrection of Jesus is not real, then our faith is futile. Because the fact is, some people will hope in just about anything and can imagine all kinds of things to give them hope – like resurrection – even if the hope that they have is just fanciful, wishful thinking.

There were once two identical twins who were alike in every way but one: One was a hope-filled optimist who only ever saw the bright side of life, while the other was a pessimist, who only ever saw the down side in every

situation. The parents were so worried about the extremes of optimism and pessimism in their boys that they consulted a doctor about it. The doctor suggested a plan. “On their next birthday give the pessimist a shiny new bike, but give the optimist only a pile of manure.”

It seemed a fairly extreme thing to do, and the parents had always treated their boys equally, so this went against their instincts. But they decided to try the doctor’s advice. So when the twins’ birthday came round they gave the pessimist the most expensive, top of the line, tricked-out bike a child has ever owned. When he saw the bike his first words were, “I’ll probably crash and break my leg.” To the optimist they gave a carefully wrapped box of manure. He opened it, looked puzzled for a moment, then ran outside screaming, “You can’t fool me! Where there’s this much manure, there’s just gotta be a pony around here somewhere!” That’s hope-filled optimism that’s more grounded in wishful thinking than reality. We don’t want our hope to be like that.

So, is the resurrection of Jesus – and the hope that springs forth from it – wishful thinking and our faith “futile,” or is it actually grounded in truth? There are a number of reasons to believe the resurrection of Jesus is true, and that our hope is not just wishful thinking. For instance: the four biographies of Jesus that are known as the Gospels, are not written like Greek mythological stories or fairytales or other similar things. They’re clearly written as biographies of an actual, living person named Jesus, who ultimately was crucified and raised from the dead. Also, there were eyewitnesses of Jesus alive at the writing of the Gospels – Luke explicitly states in his opening words that he did his research and is passing down what he’s learned from eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus. And others would have still been alive who opposed Jesus, and the mission of his followers, who could refute the Resurrection claim if it were not true. But no refutation has been found or is ever even referenced in any other historical document.

Additionally, the disciples – who were initially timid and afraid after Jesus’ death, probably for fear that they’d be identified as his disciples and perhaps suffer a similar fate – they are transformed and emboldened in their faith after their initial fear. The reason is Jesus’ resurrection. Lastly, Jesus’ radical

claims about his origins and his mission should have been discredited by his death, and the disciples should have dispersed. But just the opposite happened as the Church grew, and the claim that He was raised back to life is the reason. These are a few of the reasons to believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is not a myth or a fairytale, but is grounded in truth, and that we can be hopeful and hope-filled people.

And as I said earlier, we all need hope in our lives at some point. We may not right now...we may even think it belongs to somebody else, because we cover up our hardships pretty well here on the Eastside. We live in a part of the world where daily hardship is not the norm – it does exist for some, but it's not the norm. We don't even have the "hardship" of a terrible Mariners team this year. The hardships we face regularly are trying to keep up with the Joneses, right? That's not really hardship, of course, and we know it.

But eventually, hardships will come. It's inevitable. It could be something quick and radical that brings a hardship about, like the doctor saying, "it's cancer," or an accident of some kind that leaves you physically changed; Or it could be the slow erosion of a marital relationship or an ever-tightening grip of an addiction that brings your world down. Every person on the face of the earth goes through hardships in life. You cannot escape them. And we all have a final one that we face, in death: our own, as well as the deaths of loved ones. What is going to give you hope in those times? Is it a hope that's like a futile wish upon a star or a fairytale? Or is it a hope that's actually grounded in reality and that has some teeth to it? Jesus gives us hope that isn't just a wish; it's for real. **In fact, calling it "hope" and saying that we are "hopeful people" is almost misleading, because the word is usually in reference to wanting an outcome that isn't likely to happen. But the Christian hope is grounded in something that already *has* happened: Jesus' resurrection.** Hebrews 6:19 puts it like this, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." It's firm hope with a guaranteed outcome you can anchor your life to because Jesus walked back out of the tomb. What have you ever hoped in that has those credentials?

There was once a pastor who died and was waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. (Clearly the storyline here is not 100% Biblically correct, even if the

point it makes is good.) Ahead of him was a guy dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket and jeans. Saint Peter said to this cool guy, “Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to let you enter the Kingdom of Heaven?” The guy replied, “I’m Jack, a new Jesus-follower and retired airline pilot from Houston.” Saint Peter consulted his list. He smiled and said to the pilot, “Take this silk robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom.” The pilot went into Heaven with his robe and staff.

Next, it was the pastor’s turn. He stood up and said, “I am Pastor Bob: life-long Jesus-follower, and pastor at the same church for 43 years.” Saint Peter consulted his list. He smiled and said to the pastor, “Take this cotton robe and plastic staff and enter the Kingdom.” “Just a minute,” the pastor said. “That man was a *pilot* and just recently became a Christian...and he gets a *silk* robe and *golden* staff and I get only *cotton* and *plastic*? How can this be?” “Up here, we go by results,” said Saint Peter. “When you preached, people slept. When he flew, people prayed.”

The reason I stand here and preach this morning and every Sunday morning is not so you’ll sleep. And this is a very alert congregation. I get up and preach every Sunday because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the hope that we have in Him. And that hope is not just for “somebody else,” much like that ballerina spoke of people’s perceptions about ballet. You might not need ballet in your life (though honestly, you should give it a shot), but you’re going to need something to lift you up. You’re going to need hope. Some of you are here this morning and you’re in need of some hope right now as you’re sitting here because of what’s going on in your life. And: **The hope that Jesus gives is for you.** Whatever hardships you are facing right now...whatever hardships you will face in the future...Jesus’ resurrection gives us an assured future and a hope that is grounded in Him. I pray you know this hope that He offers.

As we are doing each Sunday in this series, I invite us all to join together in saying today’s statement of belief: **“I can cope with the hardships of life because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.”** Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ April 19, 2019 edition of the Seattle Times – online (presumably in print as well).

ⁱⁱ This story, and the other two in today’s message (the one about the twins and the pastor/pilot story), is readily available online in a number of places.