

“A New and Living Hope”
Acts 2:22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9;
John 20:19-31

April 23, 2017
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

I think back on Easter, on that first resurrection morning and how much excitement there was, how the women went to the grave and found it empty, how they met Jesus and then came back and, at least in one story, Peter and John ran to see the empty tomb for themselves. There is this incredible moment of hope. There is a new hope that comes to them in that encounter on that morning.

It feels like everything from then on should just go gloriously. This new hope is present for them and that's all they need. And yet this is the end of that day. According to this scripture in John, it's still the same day and here they are gathered together in fear. What has happened between the morning and the evening?

As they gathered on that evening, we see that they begin to wonder about that hope, and we begin to wonder what they fear. For you know as they gather, they wonder about the stories of that morning; a lot of the disciples didn't get to have that experience of new hope.

What did they experience? They are still reeling from the Friday before when what they experienced was the crucifixion. If you think about the time they lived in, it was a time when it was pretty violent. The leaders of the time didn't seem to have much compunction about knocking people off, literally. Think about what it meant; think about what they've experienced. This is one description from Palestine in the time of Jesus about what crucifixion was:

Furthermore, crucifixion was an institution of humiliation, torture, and execution designed to deal with people considered most threatening to the establishment and its interests. It was public, demeaning, and painful. It was designed to strike fear into the hearts of any who would dare pose a threat to the status quo. Whenever they crucified the condemned, it was on the most crowded roads where the most people could see and be moved by the spectacle. They chose penalties relating not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect.

This is the experience that they had just had on Friday, watching Jesus go through this. Now there was this glimmer of hope that faded as the day wore on. It seems that they began to wonder, “Are we those people considered to be most threatening to the establishment and its interests?” And so they gathered together.

It may be that when we read 1st Peter, part of what he was thinking about when he was talking about having to go through the fire to get genuine faith was this day, this struggle with the worry about what was going to happen to them. Maybe somebody remembered that Jesus had said, “Pick up your cross and follow me,” and they were wondering now if he meant that literally. They seemed to be huddled together behind the closed doors. They had locked the door. I don't know if they really thought that would keep out the Temple guards and the Romans, but it probably gave them some sense of security. After all, Jesus was gone. There had been this experience that a few had had, but at this point they were wondering what was going to happen.

Of course that's when Jesus shows up and says, "Be at peace." Jesus enters in and lets them know that he is with them, he is available and will guide them. This is really not over. God's presence—the Holy Spirit—is with them. That's another wonderful moment; a moment when their faith is renewed.

However, there's one who's not there, and that's Thomas. Thomas is the one who said, "Let's go into Jerusalem and die together." Well, they hadn't died, and now it seems that he doesn't want to. But he also doesn't think he can quite trust what these other folks are saying. It is Thomas that helps us recognize how easy it is to have a problem with trust. Here, his closest associates are telling him what they have seen, what they have experienced, and he just can't accept it. It seems a problem that's still present with us today. How hard it is to trust another, to trust their witness, to trust what is being given us. Thomas gets that experience of meeting Jesus himself. But Jesus says, "For many you will be the witness. They won't see me directly."

For me, this is an invitation to us to remember that we can trust in the witness that is given us—the scriptures, the experiences of the peace of Christ in our lives. It is in that trusting that we, too, can come like Thomas did and worship him. Peter says it's a new and certain hope that we are given, that this is all about bringing us into new life. It's not something I can simply create in a lecture. It's something that we have to do as we believe into the faith. We accept the witness.

There was that moment of new hope on that early morning and it develops as they encounter Jesus again, and it develops as we encounter Jesus through the scripture and through the prayer and through the remembering of the resurrection and of moments in our lives. But it is also in the trust we have in the witness, the trust that this gospel is given us because it is good news, and that it would bring us into new life through Jesus Christ. That's why John says he wrote this. He says the purpose is that we have confidence Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God, and that through this confidence (or trust, or faith, or belief) we may have life in his name.

It feels to me like over and over again the gospel is willing to give us good news that there is a way to life, and to life everlasting through the work of God through Jesus Christ. And yet it's always a struggle to accept it and to live into it, perhaps because it's not all glorious living. There are moments of struggle. It takes working through, going through the hardships, and holding on through those moments of fear when we want to close the doors and lock them. There are moments when the world seems crazy around us, but as we remember and accept the witness, as we recognize the peace we are given and the grace that's been shared, it is a promise that we're being led into a fullness of life and to an everlasting life. It's one of the ways I try to understand whether something is of God. Is it something that leads to life, or not? Is it something that breaks our relationships, or is it something that enables us to love one another and show grace? Am I following Jesus, allowing him to give me the Holy Spirit and guide me into life, or am I grabbing hold of something for myself?

This story is an invitation again to remember that as we accept Christ into our lives, we are led into life, and life everlasting. In spite of the fear, in spite of the struggle, this path is to life. Amen.