

Living Hope for Today

In the name of him who will one day raise us from the dead, dear friends in Christ: Let me begin by asking a question: How many of you have ever been in a situation you described as “hopeless”? (Uh- huh, just about everyone ... much as I suspected.) Okay, now I want you to think for a moment: what was it that made the situation appear hopeless to you? I think you’d agree that you called it hopeless because you were confronted with a problem of some kind for which there seemed to be no satisfactory solution. There was no way out. The only conceivable answers were too elusive, impossibly complicated, or immeasurably far beyond yours or any other human’s ability to achieve. When any of us faces a problem like that, we’re likely to call it “hopeless”.

That was precisely the kind of problem that the Lord showed Ezekiel in this morning’s Old Testament reading. In a vision the prophet finds himself in a wide desert valley filled with sun-bleached human bones. You’ve probably heard the song about it (dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones). Anyway, what Ezekiel sees is the world’s most complicated jigsaw puzzle. There are over 300 bones in a human skeleton, and here before him are the remains of millions of people. And the bones are all mixed up, scattered about, and stacked in a great heap. Some are half or completely buried in the sand. There’s no telling how deep they go. So as the prophet considers what he’s seeing, the last thing he expects is the Lord’s question, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel had to be thinking, “Live? I was afraid you were going to ask me to sort them out and give them a proper burial. But live again? Forget it!” Humanly speaking, the situation was hopeless.

Of course, Ezekiel understood that he wasn’t speaking to a human. Still, he balked at the idea of giving an emphatic, “Yes, sure Lord, you can do anything you want.” Instead, he tried to envision what such a miracle might look like; and having failed even to imagine it, he responded, “O Lord God, only you know.” As far as Ezekiel was concerned, for these bones to come to life again would take a miracle greater than he had ever heard of – and as a student of the Scriptures, he knew that the Lord was capable of some pretty amazing things.

And it’s important for us to understand that Ezekiel knew that this vision of the bones was a representation of the nation of Israel. You see, one hundred fifty years earlier, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel had been conquered and dispersed throughout the ancient world by the Assyrians. As far as history is concerned, as an identifiable people group, they’re gone. Never heard of again. And now, in Ezekiel’s lifetime, what little bit remained of God’s people had been conquered and carried off to foreign lands by the Babylonians. It seemed that the same fate of disappearing forever as a separate and identifiable race of people was well underway with them. That’s what these bones represented: a dead nation: scattered, lost, dried up, and without hope. And Ezekiel and the people with him in exile from the Promised Land simply couldn’t imagine how the situation could change in such a way that their nation might be brought back to life.

The same was true of Mary and Martha as we heard in this morning’s Gospel lesson. They had seen Jesus do some amazing things; even raise people from the dead. But those people had been dead only a very short time, a matter of hours at the most. But raise someone who’d been dead four days? Forget it: it’s hopeless. “Jesus, you should have gotten here sooner when you still could have done something to help. Too late now.” They simply couldn’t imagine how their brother could be brought back to life. Instead they set their hopes on

something unreachably distant: the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day – *that* they could at least envision and hope for; but for the *present*, they had no hope.

Well, Ezekiel and Mary and Martha learned otherwise. For the prophet, the Lord first showed him a vision of the nation coming back to life. And then in the events that followed historically, the Lord did it. He brought back his people from where they had been scattered among the Gentiles and gave new life to a nation that had been destroyed. And we heard what Jesus did for Mary and Martha: he brought their hopelessly dead brother back from the grave. Jesus showed them that with him nothing is impossible. Therefore, for the one who has faith in Jesus, there is no such thing as having no hope – not for the future; but just as importantly, not for the present.

But I wonder if sometimes we too fall into the trap of having no hope for the *present*. Sure, as Christians we all hold the hope of *final* glory. We look forward to the day of the resurrection of the dead. That is as it should be, because the Lord has promised to do that, and he always keeps his word. And we need to understand that when we speak of Christian hope, we're not talking about an uncertain, "pie in the sky", desire for what *might* happen. It's not the, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice if things turned out that way" kind of hope. No, the Biblical idea of hope is a patient, confident expectation that God will fulfill his word. We *know* that God will raise the dead in Christ, and we all look forward to that day. But what do we hope for *now*? For today? For tomorrow? My question is this: Is our hope just the light shining at the end of a dark tunnel when we finally reach God and his glory? Or is God with his glory *here, now*, giving us hope for the *present* as well as the future?

Jesus himself answers the question: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Well? You believe, don't you? When was the last time *you* saw the glory of God? Hold that thought; I'm going to come back to it. First, I want to return to this notion of our hope for the present. If God *is* with us here, now, giving us hope for the present as well as the future, what is it we should be hoping for?

Well, we know that Christian hope is the eager expectation that God will fulfill his promises to us, right? Okay, so what are the promises of God that apply to the present? Fortunately for us, contrary to what the health and prosperity preachers proclaim, we know that God hasn't promised to make us rich, or healthy, or comfortable, or anything like that in a material sense. He hasn't promised to spare us from all the hardship and trouble of this world. So, as much as we might like those things, we don't hope for them in a Christian sense. What *has* God promised? He's promised to increasingly conform us to the image of his Son by the power of his Holy Spirit. So we *can* hope that as we go through our lives we will be every day more Christ-like in our thoughts, words, and actions. And again, I don't mean, "Let's just sit back and wait to see if it happens, and if it does, that'll be great"; I mean that we ought to have the real expectation that God will be working this change in us, *now*, in the *present*.

But how many of us really believe that tomorrow we're going to be more like Christ than we are today? Our problem is that we cannot imagine how it might be done. Like Ezekiel, and Mary, and Martha, we think it's hopeless. We have no hope for the present because we cannot conceive of how sinners such as ourselves could be more Christ-like. Sure, off there in the future when sin and temptation are gone forever, well, then we'll be what we should be; but for now, forget it! It's hopeless! We can shrug our shoulders and say, "Hey, I'm a sinner; so I sin. What of it? I can't change. Besides, I've tried. Lord knows I've tried to be a better person: to be more charitable, more forgiving, more loving toward my spouse and family. It just doesn't

work – not over the long haul. And I’ve tried too to give up certain sins; but in the end, I find I cannot overcome temptation.”

I wonder ... could the truth be that we don’t even want to try to imagine our lives without our favorite vices? We like our pet sins. We don’t think we’d like what our lives would be if we gave them up. Nor do we really want to become truly loving, forgiving, and self-sacrificing like Christ. We fear what would happen then – how people would take advantage of us. Besides, it would take far too much effort. Let me suggest that we don’t hope for change because we don’t want to change. We keep our dead, sinful nature sealed up in our hearts because we want to guard and protect it from exposure to the Light. Besides, we know that if we opened up our hearts to look inside, all we would find is a stinking, rotting corpse – something we’d be ashamed of and that we don’t want anyone else to see. So it’s best, we tell ourselves, to leave it lie where it is undisturbed. Leave it alone. It’s hopeless.

That’s what Ezekiel thought. So did Mary and Martha. But their lack of hope did not prevent the Lord from doing what they thought to be impossible. What God says, happens. And that’s important, because God speaks today through his Word. What his Word says will happen. He tells Ezekiel, “Prophecy unto these bones.” The Lord means, “Ezekiel, declare my Word to them.” And if any of us were in Ezekiel’s sandals, we’d probably be thinking, “Right. Just talk to a bunch of dried up old bones and that will make everything better. C’mon; how can that work? There’s nobody here to hear me.” On the other hand, when God tells you to do something, you do it. There’s no point in trying to argue with him. Everyone who’s ever tried has lost. So Ezekiel spoke to the bones as he had been instructed. And because he spoke God’s Word, Ezekiel beheld a miracle. He saw the bones come together, sorting themselves out by God’s mighty power. He saw flesh and skin cover them. And he saw God’s Spirit enter and bring life to those he considered to be hopelessly dead. Merely by speaking God’s Word, Ezekiel saw the glory of God.

I asked you before, “When was the last time you saw the glory of God?” ... Well, when was the last time you witnessed a Baptism? What happened then? Someone spoke God’s Word, and God’s own Spirit entered and brought life to someone who was completely, one hundred percent dead in sin. That’s what the Bible says about Baptism. That’s what you believe, isn’t it? “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

All right, what happened the last time you took part in the Lord’s Supper? Let me tell you: someone spoke God’s Word over bread and wine. And what happened? The body and blood of the Lord Jesus were given to you for the forgiveness of your sin. That’s what the Scripture’s declare, isn’t it? And that’s what you believe. And furthermore, you know that where there is the forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation – For *you, here, now*, in the present.

And what happens in a service in which you confess your sin and you hear from the pastor the words of absolution? Let me tell you what happens: God’s word comes to you in the form of the Law. It rolls away that stone that seals up the sinful body of flesh in your heart. You probably don’t want to look in there because you know what kind of evil and decay are in there. But with God’s Word comes the Light that exposes all you try to hide. And so you do look, and you shudder at what you see. So you confess your sin. You describe what you see in there: the dry bones, the putrefied corpse of a miserable sinner. And then the Gospel comes to you – the good news that Jesus Christ died to take away your sins. And the Holy Spirit breathes new life into the tomb of your heart. A new, righteous person comes forth: a person led by God’s own Spirit, a person with no obligation to live according to the sinful nature. Yes, like Lazarus

it's still wrapped in the grave clothes of death; but it's nevertheless struggling to be free. You've heard what you're supposed to do now, "Unbind it. Let it go."

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we can be perfect in this life. There still is a bright light at the end of the tunnel, when God's Spirit will raise our dead bodies to live in everlasting righteousness. And we look forward to that day with eager anticipation. What I am saying is that we can be better – that we should hope to be better; because as St. Paul says in today's Epistle, the same Spirit whom we confidently hope will raise us on the Last Day is working on changing us right now. If you believe in the resurrection, then you must also believe in the Spirit's power to give you new life now. And we know that the Spirit works through the Word of God. It gave you new life in your Baptism. It continues to bring you new life in Confession, and the Lord's Supper, and yes, also in the preached Word that you are hearing right now. And because you know that the Spirit is working in you, you should expect to see yourself transformed more and more to the image of Christ whose Spirit it is who lives in you. To fail to have that expectation would be like Lazarus calling back from the tomb, "Uh, no thanks, Lord! I'm dead. I don't think I can get up and come forth! Try again on the Last Day – and don't bother me until then!"

That would be absurd. So let's not go there. Instead, since we have this living hope for the present, let's let it influence the way we live our lives. I mean, wouldn't Mary and Martha have done things differently if for four days they still expected that Jesus would raise their brother? If nothing else, they would have saved a lot of money on a funeral, don't you think? In the same way, you have the living hope of being more like Christ. And you know that if you want to harvest beans, you have to plant beans. In the same way, if you hope to produce Christ-like thoughts, words, and actions, you have to plant Christ. And that's what you do when you let him come to you in his Word. It's through your exposure to God's Word that the Spirit shines light on sin, kills the old body of flesh, imparts faith in the Gospel, and brings forth a new person full of the fruits of the Spirit; fruits like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and the ability to forgive as you have been forgiven. These are the changes you should hope for because they are Christ-like.

But you cannot change yourself: *that is* hopeless. Only God can change you. And you know that he will because he has given you his promise. So you can be confident that he will continue to change you as you listen to, receive, and meditate upon his Word. This is our living hope for the present. And we know that he will do it now just as he will do it in a greater sense on the Last Day, for he has said, "I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live ... Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!