

Living Hope

In the name of Jesus, our Lord and our God, dear friends in Christ: It's hard to believe, isn't it? I mean, at the beginning of today's Gospel we have the disciples doing everything right – at least according to health experts. We find them where they are supposed to be: in total lockdown. They're keeping their gathering to 10 people or less, since there were originally twelve of them and we know Judas is dead and Thomas is not present. And because we know them to be conscientious Jews who are used to following strict rules, we can safely assume that they are keeping at least six feet between – or as they would say it, *four cubits* between them. So, they're doing this quarantine thing right. And then suddenly Jesus barges in and wrecks everything. His presence immediately puts them over the ten person limit. And if that were not bad enough, one of the first things he does is *breathe* on everybody. What's up with that? Did he not get the message? Is he deliberately trying to infect them with something?

Okay, I *hope* you weren't offended by my feeble attempt to extract a bit humor from what is a serious situation; but the answer to that last question is an emphatic *yes*, Jesus *is* trying to infect them with something – something they once had to some small degree but then lost completely. It's what Peter calls in today's Epistle "living hope".

What is hope? Hope is when struggling through difficult times or experiencing painful situations you hold the belief and confident expectation that things are going to get better, that your situation will improve, that your future is going to be brighter and rosier than the present. And hope is an extremely good thing. In accounts I've read about American prisoners of war who were held under absolutely horrific conditions in Viet Nam or in the South Pacific Theater during WWII, what made the most difference between those who died and those who lived was the quality of hope. Some simply gave up and died. Others held to the belief that they would one day be rescued and repatriated. The majority of them lived. I recall too seeing a scientific survey of patients who had suffered their first heart attack. One of the biggest factors for determining longevity after the attack – even above such medical risk factors as high blood pressure and cholesterol level – was hope. Those who couldn't see themselves getting much better in the future tended to sink into gloom and die comparatively earlier. Those who remained optimistic and could imagine improvement lived much longer. The results led one wag to remark "It's healthier to eat Twinkies in hope than broccoli in despair."

In this life we employ hope for many things. It's what drives students to buckle down and study hard in order to achieve their career goals. It's what drives athletes to push themselves to the limits of their physical endurance to improve their performance and win. Hope is what moves a young man to risk rejection and humiliation to ask a pretty girl out on a date. And certainly farmers know all about it: how they work hard, long hours with the hope that the growing conditions will be right, that there won't be a plague of pests or disease or hail or drought, that the machinery will keep running, that the harvest will be bountiful, and that when all is said and done the prices will be high enough to make it worthwhile. All of that takes *a lot* of hope.

As I said earlier, hope especially comes into play when dealing with difficult times. When the dread diagnosis of cancer is heard, it's hope of recovery that allows a patient to suffer through treatments of radiation and chemotherapy. Right now we are living in hope. We hope that this corona virus plague will soon be passed. We hope that no one we know catches it.

We hope that if they do, they recover. And we hope that in the near future there will be an effective vaccine to prevent anyone from contracting the disease.

Yes, we live in hope. And that's problematic for two reasons. The first is that our hopes in this life are always punctuated with a big "*if*". No matter how hard students study, they might not attain their goals. No matter how hard athletes train, they might not win. Though he has all the hope in the world, that pretty girl may say no to the young man whose heart is set on courtship. Even the most dedicated farmer may fail. And there's a reason the doctors give cancer patients the odds of recovery. It's because some don't make it. Our hopes in this life are subject to failure.

The other problem with living in hope is that hope has a lot of enemies. And for some reason unknown, it happens that most of them begin with the letter "D". The list of hope-killers includes doubt, despair, defeat, danger, disappointment, dismay, disaster, discouragement, and dread – by which I mean fear, of course, but I needed a synonym that started with "D". Another "D", the devil, is a master of robbing people of hope. And then there is the ultimate "D": death. That's where all hope in this life ends. There's no escaping it. And that's why all the hopes in this life are dying hopes. They all come to the same end.

That brings us back to the disciples of Jesus in their self-imposed quarantine. Until recently, they were men with high hopes – the highest hopes imaginable. They had seen themselves as princes in a restored kingdom of Israel. They had imagined themselves seated at the right and left hand of King Jesus, his white house staff and counselors, so to speak, ruling over a realm of earthly glory. They had seen themselves as the richest and most powerful men in the world. They had high hopes, all right.

And they all came crashing down hard when Jesus was arrested, condemned, and raised up on the cross. To be sure, some hope still remained. As the chief priests and others mocked him saying, "If you are the Christ, the Son of God, prove it. Come down from the cross" the disciples thought, "Yes, Jesus, do it! We know you can! Show them who you are!" They hoped with all their hearts that he would. But he didn't. He died. And with him, all their hope died too. So it is that we find them cowering in the gathering gloom behind locked doors – a self-imposed tomb of sorts – their uncertain future as bleak as it could be, their hope dead, and in its place a growing sense of dread.

Then suddenly Jesus appeared, standing among them, showing them the wounds by which he atoned for the sins of the world, and declaring to them the peace of the Lord. And he breathed new life into them. He breathed into them the living hope that Peter speaks of today's Epistle, the living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the living hope of an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, a living hope that cannot die because it is the certainty of eternal life after death. It's the firm confidence that because Jesus lives and because by his death he overcame the power of death, that we too will be raised from the dead and live forever with him in the glory of the new heaven and earth.

We live in this living hope, knowing that whatever trials, set-backs, disappointments, sorrows, and defeats we may suffer, whatever other earthly hopes we have that get dashed, we still have cause to rejoice in this one hope we still have. We know too that the trials the Lord sends us are intended by him to refine our faith (more precious than gold), to keep us focused on the goal, and help us witness to the dying world of the living hope that we have. Therefore in this living hope we do rejoice, as Peter says, "with a joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" because we "are obtaining the outcome of [our] faith, the salvation of [our] souls."

His encouraging words made me think of the last line in one of our hymns. It's number 698 in the hymnal entitled *May We Thy Precepts, Lord, Fulfill*. The line goes "To each of us the blessing give in Christian fellowship to live, *In joyful hope to die.*" When I was younger that confused me. I thought, "Who joyfully hopes to die?" It's like, "Oh boy, I just can't wait! Dig a grave and drop me in!" But that's not what it means. It is instead a prayer to the Lord that I will continue to live in the fellowship of believers and that when my death comes I will have that joyful, living hope that sees ahead to the life to come. May the Lord in his mercy grant us this prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!