

**“Claiming Our Christian Heritage:  
As the People of Hope”  
I Corinthians 15:12-28**

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“What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of life,” said renowned theologian Emil Brunner. “Take oxygen away and death occurs through suffocation. Take hope away, and humanity is constricted to senselessness.” As baptized Christians, we’re called to be the body of Christ and to live our lives in faith, hope and love in order that the world may believe. This is our Christian identity. We bring this series of sermons home today by talking about that wonderful four-letter word – **HOPE**.

On difficult days, we like to say, “Where there’s life, there’s hope.” Today, I’d like to introduce you to a new way of thinking. It’s “**Where there’s hope, there’s life.**” Keeping hope alive is one of life’s greatest challenges. In fact, it is absolutely essential!

Now hope is more than we sometimes imagine it to be. You see, **hope is more than wishful thinking**. Life is full of wishes. I wish I could play the piano. I wish I could par a golf course; even a putt-putt golf course would be alright. I wish it would never rain on your parade. I wish I could heal the hurts of others. I wish I could collect the abused and abandoned children in Nashville, and take them home with me. I wish I never had to schedule another funeral. I admire the *Make A Wish Foundation* in this country that tries to fulfill the wishes of terminally ill children, but I say to you today, hope is very different from simply wishing.

When I was about seven years of age, I attended the County

Fair at the place of my heritage. They had a little pony with the fanciest saddle and bridle I'd ever seen. They planned to raffle it off, so I immediately went home, robbed my piggy bank, and bought a raffle ticket. Throughout the week, I lived in high hopes, fantastic dreams and deep, religious faith that come Saturday night, that pony, in all its glory, was going to be mine. I had visions of being Roy Rogers himself in that moment in time. When Saturday night came and my father refused to take the truck to the fair, I couldn't understand his logic. How were we going to get my prize pony home? When the drawing was over and I didn't get what I prayed for, I remember a significant crisis in my childhood faith. I had to learn early that wishing and hoping are different things.

Henry Nouwen says in one of his books, "Prayer for many people is nothing more than wishful thinking." We'd like for wars to cease and the sick to get well. We'd like to do well on the test, especially if we haven't studied beforehand. We'd like for things to work out well at home, but great prayers of hope are centered on a relationship, not a result. It's centered on a Person, not a product. Hope is more than wishful thinking.

Let me hasten to say that **hope is more than positive living.**

A man and his wife fished for more than three solid hours in a mountain lake. They moved around five or six different times but didn't have a single nibble. The positive thinking husband glanced at his bored wife and said, "Hasn't this been great fun? Now we know where the fish aren't and we can go to where they are and we'll have a really great time together!"

I like positive people; in fact, I like to think the glass is half-full, not half-empty. I enjoy that kind of relationship. George Burns, in his book, *How to Live to be a Hundred or More* said, "The first thing to do is to stay away from funerals, especially your own. If you get up and read the obituaries and your name is not there, go ahead and have breakfast. If you do

find your name there, you ought to eat anyway 'cause you've got a long trip ahead of you."

While optimism makes us live as if someday soon things are going to get better for us, hope frees us from the need to predict the future and allows us to live fully in the present. Hope is more than positive living.

**Hope is more than good luck.** We say to people all the time, "Good luck," or "The best of luck to you." What is this fascination of Americans with luck? Have we replaced Christian faith with a kind of secular luck? Have game shows, casinos, state lotteries, and, to some degree, the stock market, altered our core values to the place that we'd rather be lucky than responsible? Are we really pawns of fate, hoping against hope that the odds of chance are with us, not against us? What happens to us if we live our lives simply hoping that we'll be lucky? Everybody who believes in luck knows that sooner or later, you'll have some bad luck as well as good luck.

Even if we've worked for it and paid for it with blood, sweat, and tears, does our hope lie in bigger barns and better houses? Do these earthly things really fulfill us in some particular way? Good luck becomes bad luck in no time at all. Jesus called such thinking foolish for no one knows the day or the hour of our demise.

It reminds me of the story that my pastoral care professor, Wayne Oates, used to tell. He's making a hospital call on a guy the night before he was to have by-pass surgery. The nurses had asked him to come as the man was in an unusual panic about surgery. When Wayne walked in and introduced himself as the chaplain, the man immediately said to him, "I'm scared to death." "Why are you so afraid?" asked Wayne. "Well," said the guy, "the nurses have told me that the surgeon who's going to operate on me has done more than a

thousand of these operations successfully. Now all of us know that no human being is perfect, so the odds are all against me.” You see, if you live by luck, you may have good luck, you may have bad luck, or you may have no luck at all! Hope is more than luck.

If hope is more than wishful thinking and hope is more than positive living and hope is more than simply having good luck on a particular day, then just what is hope? Where does our hope come from? In whom do we place our hope? Here’s the point of the whole sermon. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and His resurrection, particularly, His resurrection. There is our hope.

Listen to the writings of Paul in our scripture lesson for today. Verse 14 says, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Verse 17 tells us, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you’re still in your sins.” Verse 19 – “If only in this life, we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people.” Like the song says, “*Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness, I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.*” Do you believe what you just sang? Therein is our hope. It’s only in Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

Hope in Jesus Christ is grace for yesterday. Only in Christ are all our sins forgiven. Driving across town, a commuter was stunned by the actions of a truck driver right in front of him. It was one of those closed in delivery trucks and every time this trucker came to a stoplight, he would jump out of the cab, take a broom from behind the seat and beat on the side of the truck. The ritual was repeated again and again and again, at every stoplight. The commuter followed the trucker across town. Finally, the guy pulled into a restaurant truck stop, and curiosity got the best of the commuter. He pulled in right behind him. That’s when the trucker got out of his truck, took

the broom and beat on all sides of the truck. The commuter drove up beside the trucker and said, "If you don't mind, I need to ask a question. Why do you get out and beat on the side of your truck every time you stop?" The trucker replied, "It's simple. I've got four tons of canaries in this two-ton truck and I have to keep half of them flying all the time."

I've run into a lot of people who are beating and banging and running and pushing and striving and driving, that if you got down underneath the surface you'd find something similar going on. They are trying to keep their guilt in the air all the time so that the load of it will not sink into the depths of their soul and lead them to despair. I've got news for you today. Your sins can be forgiven. I've got even better news than that. Your sins have already been forgiven. If the gospel is right at all, the whole event of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection provided a means and a method by which you ought not leave this place guilty. Bring your sins to the Lord and leave them here.

Grace is available for you! Isn't it about time you leaned into that hope and stopped trying to do it all yourself? Our hope in Jesus Christ is grace for yesterday. It is strength for today.

A friend of ours sent us a little saying on a magnet that goes like this, "I knew God would never give me anything I can't handle, I just wish He didn't trust me so much." A woman writing in *Today's Christian Woman* said, "I cried to God, I just can't do it, I just can't do it. I can't handle the housework and my work and the loneliness of a husband who works all the time. In the midst of my crying, the Holy Spirit said to me, 'You're trying to do everything in your own strength. Will you just worship Me and trust Me to do the rest?' Now when my burdens are heavy, I stop and I worship God. I praise God in the midst of every situation, grateful that He will provide a way for me when it's difficult." Hope in Jesus Christ is strength for today. If God can raise Jesus Christ from the dead, can He

not raise you to a meaningful life?

The great preacher, Phillips Brooks, said, “Do not pray for an easy life, pray to be a stronger person. Do not pray for tasks equal to your power, pray for power equal to your tasks.” I don’t know about you, but I’ve been over my head all my life. If I resided in my own strengths, my own ability, my own wisdom, I would have failed a long, long time ago. Until you’re trying to do something more than you can do in your own strength and your own might, you don’t know what it really is to hope in the Lord and to trust Him with all your heart. There will always be an enormous gap between what God wants you to do with your life and what you feel like you’re capable of doing in your own might. Be assured of this – God never expects us to do anything that He will not empower us by His grace to do.

Our hope is built on Jesus Christ. He alone gives us grace for yesterday, strength for today and, one more thing – Potential for tomorrow. Did you hear the text? Verse 22 says, “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive,” and verse 25, “So Christ must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet.” Verse 26, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Because Christ lives, we have a future. Eternity is implanted in our souls. There is a tomorrow for you and there is hope for the person who is taking their last breath on this earth. I’ve seen people, hundreds of them, grasp it and understand it and live into it in hopeful ways.

There is a tomorrow. The same Hands that stretched the heavens will touch your cheeks. The same Hands that formed the mountains will caress your face. The same Hands that were nailed with Roman spikes, will wipe every tear from your eyes. There is a place where dying is finished. We’re going to meet the Lord. No hearses, no cemeteries, no tombstones, no names chiseled in marble, no funerals, no more good-byes because we’re going to meet the Lord.

That's our faith. That's our heritage in the church. We need to proclaim it.

Lloyd Olgive, who's now the chaplain of the U.S. Senate, tells the story about being on an airplane from Denver to Los Angeles. He said it was a beautiful flight until somebody delivered a bomb threat and the destructive cargo was set to explode at 5,000 feet. "Suddenly it hit me," says Lloyd, "this might be the last day of my life. All my unfinished business flashed before my eyes. I began to pray to the Lord, 'I've got so much to do, You can't do without me. You need to get me through this thing.' Then a deep assurance flooded my soul and I suddenly realized I belonged to the Lord whether I was dead or alive. My loved ones passed before my mind's eye. I began to thank God for every one of them. I laughed and I cried as I remembered the years of my life and the joys that I experienced, and the things that had happened. I realized God had been good and I was grateful."

"The bomb scare was a hoax," writes Lloyd, "but I was a changed man that day because I recognized that in the midst of the temporal, there was something eternal and everlasting." Do you know that truth today?

*We see only a little of the ocean, A few miles' distance from the rocky shore, But oh, out there beyond the horizon, There's more, there's more. We only see a little of God's loving, A rich treasure from His mighty store, but oh, out there, beyond the horizon, There's more, there's more.*

Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and His resurrection. That's grace for yesterday, strength for today, and potential for tomorrow.

Somebody said a person can live forty days without food, four days without water, four minutes without air, but only four seconds without hope. Isn't it about time that you embraced the risen Christ and learned how to live, not merely survive?

Isn't it about time? Amen.