

The Reason for Our Hope

1 Peter 3:8-18

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From Perry Mason to Matlock to dozens of other shows, we watch television lawyers prepare their defense. Some of you probably have real life experience of being involved with preparing a legal defense. Peter says here that every Christian, the entire Church, needs to prepare a defense—not in the legal sense, but, he says, “Always be prepared to make your defense to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have” (15). The Christians Peter was writing to were experiencing persecution, so they could have been called to defend their faith in a court of law. But when he says *always* be prepared to answer *everyone*, that shows there are many opportunities to speak up and explain the Christian hope.

In the context of encouraging these Christians in the face of persecution, Peter tells them not to be intimidated or frightened. Instead, they are to have reverence in their hearts for Christ as Lord or to set apart Christ as Lord. The word there is “hallow,” as in “hallowed be thy name.” In our hearts, the control center of our lives, we recognize that Christ is Lord and we seek to honor him, to see and declare his holiness.

With our hearts set on Christ and intent on honoring him, we are always to be prepared to give an answer or make a defense. The word is *apologia*. We get the word apology from it. But we’re not apologizing for our faith as if we feel sorry about it. We also get the word apologetics from this Greek word. Apologetics is the branch of Christian theology that works to defend and explain what Christian faith and hope and life are about. There are professional theologians who specialize in apologetics, and we can be grateful for them and benefit from their ministry. But we can’t leave it all up to them, just as we can’t leave witnessing or faith-sharing up to professional evangelists. The church itself, our life as a hopeful, loving and holy community, is the best defense of Christian faith.

All Christians are called to witness and share faith in some way. It’s like a baseball team: not every player pitches, but every player needs to be

able to throw. Not every batter is a home run hitter, but every player needs to be able to hit. Not every Christian is gifted as an evangelist to reach huge numbers of people, but we each have a story to tell and people that we can reach. Not every Christian is gifted and has the resources to study and write and prepare reasoned defenses of Christian faith, but every one of us can reflect on the faith and learn how to explain something about the hope we have in Christ.

So how does this work? What does it mean to be prepared to defend the hope we have?

First, we have to have the hope Peter is talking about. We have to experience for ourselves faith and life in Christ. What is this hope Peter is talking about? Hope is sort of his shorthand for the whole Christian life. Remember how he opens the letter: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3). A little later he writes, "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming" (1:13). And, he says that through Christ "you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God" (1:21).

Even when Peter doesn't use the word hope, much of what he writes is full of hope. And much of it is connected to the resurrection of Jesus. In Christ, we are resurrection people. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, we have new life now that fills us with hope. We also have hope as we look to the future because what God did in raising Jesus shows what God will do for all his people. God will raise us to live in a new creation, new heaven and new earth. Our hope is in God who is able to create, to redeem, to raise the dead, and produce a new creation.

Because we trust in a resurrecting God, we are resurrection people and that makes us people of hope. The hope that is in us grows from the confidence we have in the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. This hope is not just wishful thinking or naïve optimism. It's grounded in the reality of God and our trust in God.

We are people of hope. There's a United Methodist ministry in Tulsa called "Restore Hope." They told us last week at Annual Conference:

The year 2013 truly was a year of HOPE at Restore Hope. *We Helped Other People Eat* through our food program, *Helped Others Prevent Eviction* with our rent program, and offered the hope of Christ through our chapel program. For the first time in 36 years, our food program worked to restore not only hope but also the dignity of choice for our client families. Meanwhile, our rent program was one of the best in the country, with a 99.64 percent success rate. And our chapel program distributed even more Bibles and shared Holy Communion with even more clients.

Another United Methodist ministry that's been around for several years is "Nothing but Nets." Through it we distribute mosquito nets to protect children and families and to help wipe out malaria. A few years ago I read about one of the Nothing but Nets workers who had visited African clinics, churches and hospitals.

She said that the symbol of hope for her was a pink mosquito net. On her trip she met Esperança Afonco at a pediatric hospital. Esperança was eight years old and suffered from both AIDS and malaria. Her mother had decorated her hospital bed to look like a bed for a Disney princess. She draped a pink insecticide-treated net over the bed, the dolls, and the child. Esperança was wearing a beautiful pink satin dress that just swallowed up her frail body.

The child's room was a stark contrast to nearby wards, where sometimes as many as three children shared a bed, along with misery and more disease. The mom explained that her daughter's immune system was too weak for her to contract malaria again. So she had to sleep under a net. A doctor whispered to the Nothing but Nets worker that the girl probably only had a few weeks to live.

The worker asked the mom, "Why have you worked so hard to create such a lovely environment?" She replied, "We have to have hope. We have to have hope." The person telling this story concluded:

Resurrection hope gives us the courage to stand beside the bed of a loved one with a terminal disease. Resurrection hope lifts us up when we look down at the open grave of one who died all too young. Resurrection hope gives us the perseverance and the courage to overcome the insults of institutional racism. Resurrection hope plants new seeds when the rain finally comes. Resurrection hope rebuilds homes and lives after a storm. Resurrection hope rebuilds a war-torn nation. Resurrection hope transforms lives and changes futures.

Then she asked the congregation to remember Esperança, whose name in Portuguese means *hope* (Janice Huie, *Proceedings of the 2008 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, Daily Edition Vol. 4, No. 3, April 25, 2008).

Do you know that resurrection hope? Have you been born anew into this living hope? If you have faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ you have been born anew into this living hope. With Christ ruling as Lord in your heart, this hope is yours.

We are to give an answer, to make our defense, to everyone who asks the reason for our hope. This raises some questions: Does our hope show? Do others see us as people of resurrection hope? Are they asking us about it?

Jim Smith at Friends University tells about recruiting a young woman to play tennis for the university's team. The girl's father asked Jim on the phone, "Is your college one of those places that beats people over the head with the Bible? Because we have not raised her to be religious, and we are concerned about that." Jim told him they never beat people with anything—being Quaker and all. But he did tell him that there were some wonderful Christian people she would be exposed to. He was fine with that. He just wanted her to have freedom of choice, and Jim assured him she did.

A few months after being at the school, she noticed the vibrant lives of many of the students on campus who were followers of Jesus but never pushed anything on her. Jim never engaged her in a conversation about God or Jesus or the Bible, but she did attend their campus fellowship. She went home over Christmas break, and when she returned to campus she

said, "I wanted to tell you that I gave my life to Jesus during the break." After much rejoicing, Jim asked, "What made you want to do that?" She said, "After seeing all of these people who have peace and joy and love, I wanted to have what they have" (*The Good and Beautiful Community* 30-31).

Is there anyone who would look at us and be drawn to make that kind of commitment? Years ago, someone made popular a question that challenges us who claim the name of Christ: If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

If people see that we live differently, that we treat others better, that we have deep confidence in God, that we are more generous, that we have different values, that we have hope, they may be curious and want to know where all that is coming from. How can we be prepared when they ask us?

This calls us not just to believe but also to think about what we believe and to have some understanding of why we believe. Why are you a believer? If someone should ask, can you tell your story of how you came to faith? Why do you have hope? If someone should ask, can you give at least an outline of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ?

Peter helps us with that. Just a little later in this chapter, he gives a very good summary of the gospel. He says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (3:18). Then he talks about the resurrection and how Jesus rules. There is some confusing stuff in verses 19-20, but the point of this section is clear. Jesus the righteous one died for all us unrighteous ones so he could bring us to God and restore our relationship with God. Through the power of God's Spirit, Jesus was made alive after he had died. He overcame all the enemies of God and of God's people. He is now exalted to the place of highest honor with God and rules over all.

That's an outline of what God has done in Jesus Christ to forgive us and give us new birth, new life. We can fill in that outline with our own experience. But it's a good place to begin to give a defense of the hope that is in us.

At Annual Conference, one of the more inspiring reports came from Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries. One of our ministries there is

Redemption Church, which focuses on reaching people in prison or who have been in prison. A man who had spent time in and out of prison and in various kinds of trouble and then got involved in a Redemption Church, told his story. He said that he had never thought about God's involvement in his life. But at nearly forty years old, he learned of God's love and care and responded. He said, "I didn't pray the sinner's prayer, but I said, 'All right, God, you've got me.'" That's not bad, is it?

Peter not only says always be prepared to give an answer to everyone, but when you give the answer, when you make your defense, *do it with gentleness and respect*. Christ's people are called to deal with everyone in gentleness or meekness. This means we don't try to establish our own justice. We don't get defensive or become offensive. Instead, we commit our cause to God. Rather than "a response that puts down the other person or criticizes the enemy, Peter wishes a gentle, humble explanation in tune with the attitude of Christ" (Peter Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* NICNT). We can practice this with each other in the church before we go out to speak to seekers and non-believers.

Not only are we to give our answer with gentleness, but also with respect or reverence. This is our attitude toward God. Christians can answer people gently because of our respect for God. We stand before God, who alone justifies us. So we don't need to defend or justify ourselves before human opinion.

Finally, Peter says that as we make our defense with gentleness and respect, we are to keep a clear conscience. Others will see our good conduct and will be unable to accuse us when our living matches our believing. He's not saying we must have perfect conduct before we can speak a word about the gospel. If we had to do that, no one would ever share the faith and speak of our hope. He's saying that our good behavior is in Christ—it flows from our union, our relationship with Christ. Christ defines good behavior and he is the power and motivation for good conduct even in the most provoking situations (Davids).

If people are going to be offended and stumble, let it be over the true gospel, over Jesus who is the stumbling stone. We don't want seekers to be offended or caused to stumble over our meanness or hypocrisy. If

unbelievers have something against us, let it be because they are convicted by our doing right and not because they are justified in accusing us of wrongdoing.

We are people of hope because of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. May that hope shine and may people be drawn to explore where it comes from. May we be prepared to give an answer, to make our defense when they ask. May we clearly communicate the gospel that is the basis of our living hope.