“A Living Hope”

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
1 Peter 1:3-5
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Sanctuary
Jim Stockdale was a decorated fighter pilot shot down during the Vietnam War. He was captured by communists and held as a prisoner of war for eight years. Despite the torture inflicted on him, Stockdale refused to capitulate to his captors. He devised an internal communication system among prisoners and smuggled intelligence information through letters to his wife. He even went so far as to deliberately disfigure his appearance so he could not be used for propaganda purposes. The picture on your screen captures his return home to his family after eight years as a prisoner of war.

Stockdale was interviewed some time later by Jim Collins, author of the bestselling business book, *Good to Great*. Collins talked with Stockdale about his experiences in a prisoner of war camp. Collins asked Stockdale, “Who didn’t make it out?” “Oh, that’s easy,” Stockdale said, “the optimists.”

“The optimists?” Collins looked surprised, “I don’t understand.” Stockdale explained that the optimists were the ones who decided they would be out by Christmas. When Christmas came and went, they revised their release date to coincide with Easter. When Easter came and went, and the calendar approached Christmas once again, they lost heart. Such prisoners died of a broken heart.

“This is an important lesson,” Stockdale said. “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of the current situation.” Collins came to speak of facing the brutal facts but never giving up hope as the Stockdale Paradox.

Today’s message is all about hope. Face the brutal facts, but never give up hope. Peter declares, “God has given us a new birth into a living hope.”

It’s challenging to preach on Easter. For starters, everybody pretty much knows what I’m going to say before I say it. People are also distracted on Easter—hosting out of town family and arranging Easter dinners, egg hunts, baskets and so much candy. I’ll wager some of our kids are already
on a sugar high. So, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do to make it easier on everybody. I’m going to limit my remarks to a single sentence; a total of 20 words and four specific phrases: “In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Our sentence begins with the words, “In his great mercy.” This phrase is placed first in this sentence for emphasis. Everything that follows—this new birth into a living hope—relies on God’s mercy. We cannot enter into this new birth and living hope by our efforts alone. God’s mercy makes it happen.

The second phrase, “He has given us a new birth,” conveys the main idea of the sentence. God’s mercy makes this new birth possible.

“You must be born again,” Jesus said to Nicodemus, (John 3:3). Born again has become something of a pejorative term in our day. You can google “born again Christians” and see what I mean. Born again is not a political ideology or social agenda. It’s a biblical phrase describing the spiritual birth God awakens in people’s hearts.

The third phrase, “into a living hope,” makes specific the goal of this new birth. “Into” is a preposition expressing purpose and direction. God’s new birth leads us in the direction of a living hope.

It’s no accident that above the entrance to Dante’s hell is the inscription, “Leave behind all hope, you who enter here.” Hell is hopelessness.

The fourth phrase tells us how God accomplishes this new birth into a living hope. All of this is made possible “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” “Through” is a preposition which means “by way of or because of.” Jesus’ resurrection makes this new birth and living hope a reality. His victory over sin and death gives living hope.

I’ll bet you’ll never guess the most watched movie of all time. No, it isn’t Star Wars or the Sound of Music. According to the New York Times, the Jesus Film is the most watched movie of all time. It’s been translated into 1,200 languages.
The Jesus Film was being shown in a church in Bangladesh. Children and adults packed the pews. When it came to the scene where Jesus was crucified, people were visibly moved. There were audible gasps in the audience and even weeping. As the emotional moment intensified, a little boy turned around in his seat and spoke to the crowd, “Don’t be afraid. He gets up again. I saw it before.”

The little boy is spot-on, “Don’t be afraid. He gets up again.” We are given a new birth into a living hope because of Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

Living hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is situation dependent. It relies on our personal circumstances to get better. You might call it wishful thinking.

Biblical hope isn’t situation dependent. It’s not based on a vague, fuzzy optimism that somehow our circumstances will break positive in the end. Biblical hope trusts God’s character and trustworthiness. Even “when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death” we need not fear since the Lord is our shepherd. Biblical hope relies on God, not our personal circumstances.

If the readers of Peter’s letter focused on their present circumstances, they would have little reason for optimism. The Emperor Nero was making life difficult for Jesus’ followers. They faced persecution and even death for their beliefs. Yet their hope was not in present circumstances. They hoped in God.

When the Psalmist becomes discouraged, he asks his soul a penetrating question: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” He answers, “Hope in God; for I will again praise you, my help and my God” (42:5-6).

Desmond Tutu served as an Anglican bishop during the civil rights era in South Africa. He had a reputation for being incredibly optimistic. He was asked by Time magazine about his optimism. Tutu corrected his interviewer, “I’m not optimistic. I’m hopeful. I’m a prisoner of hope.” The language, “prisoner of hope” originates from the ancient prophecy of
Zechariah: “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope” (12:9). If we’re going to be enslaved to anything, let it be to hope.

It may surprise you to learn that the earliest Christian symbol wasn’t a cross. Three symbols predominated in the early church: a dove, a fish and an anchor. The dove represents the Holy Spirit. The letters of the Greek word for fish, ichthus, function as an acronym for Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior. The anchor was an early church symbol for hope. Anchors were often etched into walls of ancient Christian catacombs. This image of an anchor originates from the book of Hebrews: “We have this hope as an anchor of the soul, firm and secure” (6:19).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Where do you put your hope? Some of you are only one crisis away from wishing you had given this new birth into a living hope more consideration.

Where do you put your hope? Do you put your hope in the stock market? The stock market has risen. It has risen indeed. Do I put my hope in my achievements at work or school? My achievements have risen. They have risen indeed. There is one living hope. Christ has risen. He has risen indeed.

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 begins with the right question: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Answer: “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

South Dakota State University made the jump to Division I basketball some years ago. Their men’s team had never played in the NCAA top tier tournament before 2012. The Jackrabbits, as they are called, were playing in the Summit League conference tournament. The winner would receive an automatic bid to join 67 other teams to compete for the Division I championship. In their quarterfinal conference game, Coach Seth Nagy was giving a pep talk before they took the court. He had been South Dakota’s coach since ’95 and battled through some lean years. He finished his pep talk with the words, “I want you to play like you are loved. Play freely. Love isn’t dependent on your performance. No matter how you play, you are loved. Play with that in mind.”
I’ve heard my share of pep talks, but I’ve never heard a coach tell his team to play like they are loved. South Dakota won the game and the semifinal matchup also. They won the conference finals in overtime and nearly upset Baylor in the first round of the NCAA tournament. “Play like you are loved” has become something of a motto at South Dakota.

What if you lived as though Christ has risen? Play like you are loved. Live like Christ has risen. What if you really leaned into this new birth into a living hope?

The prayer that follows is intended to open us to God’s living hope. Look it over. If it expresses the desire of your heart, pray it silently as I pray aloud.

Play like you are loved. Live like Christ has risen!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.