***LIVING HOPE AND THE HOPE OF LIV***ING

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 19, 2020

Texts: 1 Peter 1:1-9, 13-16 and Psalm 16:7-11

In a recent article in *The Presbyterian Outlook* Ron Byars retells a family story told by the father of a parishioner. There were three children in the family: two daughters had grown and left the nest; an adult son who was intellectually challenged remained at home. Every Sunday the man, his wife, and their son would attend worship with their Lutheran congregation. One week, for some reason or other, it seemed prudent to stay home, so the father told his son that they would not be going to church that day. The young man was silent for a moment, then asked, “Won’t Jesus miss us?”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Some of you may be wondering the same thing in the midst of this forced exile from our pews which is now entering its second month. Isn’t Jesus missing us all gathered here in this sacred space each week to sing his praise, lift up our prayers, hear his good news, and share his peace with one another through hugs and handshakes? We certainly miss one another! It is great to be able to connect virtually for worship, but it is just not the same as being together. It is not so much the space but the people that we miss, reinforcing for us all that the church IS the people! We miss seeing each other’s smiling faces, exchanging greetings, watching the kids come racing up the aisle to tackle me, and hearing the adults squirm in the pews. We miss catching up with each other around the coffee pot in the breezeway and singing beside friends who can really sing or at least croak out a joyful noise. We miss being the church in the way we have been accustomed to being the church – and surely Jesus misses that too!

But the reality is that for some of you, being here in this space has not been possible for a long while anyway due to illness or physical condition or a move to another part of the country. This virtual worship has brought Covenant to some of you who could not come to Covenant even without COVID-19, and while it is still not the same as being here in person, I have heard over these past weeks that it is the next best thing, a helpful thing that was not available until this pandemic hit, a thing that we will find a way to continue even after we resume our normal worship practices, because we missed you, and it has been good to include you in our worship week to week again! If we go back to doing the same old thing that we did before this virus hit, then some of you and us – and Jesus – will miss it!

This letter of Peter from which we read this morning constituted a first century version of virtual worship. It is ostensibly written by Peter, though the sophistication of the Greek makes it unlikely that Simon Peter, the blue-collar fisherman and apostle, was its real author. It was not unusual in the 1st century to have someone write in the name of another as a way of honoring him or acknowledging his influence over the writer. Thus Peter had some virtual influence in shaping the message, even if it was not by his own hand. The letter may have been written in Rome, though that too is speculative. What is more certain is the intended audience: “*the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia*.” Without knowing where those places were (the northern part of Asia Minor in case you were wondering), you could be pretty sure they were not in the same neighborhood or zip code. This is an epistle to a host of young churches in that region who were struggling to figure out what it meant to be *Christian* just fifty years or so after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The author was not there in person to read his letter, speak to the churches, answer their questions, and eat at their potlucks. Instead his letter was read to the gathered community, often in worship, and then circulated among sister churches down the road. Some of those churches were struggling to survive, others were thriving; some faced persecution and others perpetual confusion. To these disparate churches of the Dispersion as they were called, the writer offers guidance and encouragement to help them keep on keeping on faithfully. What does he suggest?

His starting point is hope: *By God’s great mercy God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*. It is not just any old hope that he offers, but *living hope*,

living hope rooted in the good news of the empty tomb and risen Lord that we celebrated last week,

living hope that is passed on from generation to generation, from community to community as the story of Jesus is told and retold,

living hope that continues to pulse and thrive and breathe new life into these new communities of faith!

It is hope that lives in our hearts as individuals and in our shared life as communities of Christ two thousand years later. It is hope that not only endured the cross but was born anew through it, as we sang moments ago:

*The powers of death have done their worst*

*But Christ their legions hath dispersed:*

*Let shouts of holy joy outburst. Alleluia!*

Our alleluias are rooted in hope, and our hope is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. Easter is about life in the face of death, not just for Jesus but for all of us who live as Easter people; it is about hope that conquered despair at the tomb on Easter morning and a living hope that dispels the fear of death for us today. As Brian Wren phrases it so beautifully in the hymn we will sing shortly:

*Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine,*

*But saving, healing, here and now,*

*and touching every place and time*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Here and now, in this place and in this time, Christ is alive to bring us healing and living hope with touches of divine grace. That is the good news of Easter that lives on in our lives today!

In 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was being held at Tegel Prison in Germany two years before his death at the hands of the Gestapo. In a letter to his family on Easter of that year Bonhoeffer expressed something of that living hope in the context of his own situation; he writes:

*The liberating thing about Good Friday and Easter is that one’s thoughts are swept far beyond one’s own personal fate to the ultimate meaning of all life and suffering, and of whatever occurs, such that one is seized by a great hope.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

In the isolation of a war-time prison, Bonhoeffer still found hope alive in the resurrection promises of Christ, a great hope he called it, a living hope!

Seventy-seven years later as we endure isolation at the hands of the COVID-19 Gestapo, we dare to hold that same hope, for it is a living hope that cannot be snuffed out by a crucifixion or a concentration camp or a coronavirus. It is hope that lives and breathes, hope that believes that no matter how dire or desperate or deadly or devious or daunting the situation, God is not dead but is with us to encourage us, inspire us, strengthen us, and save us! It is the assurance that Jesus won’t miss us this week because he is with us wherever we are, close at hand to whisper in our ears those hope-filled promises:

*I am with you!*

*I am alive! Because I live, you also will live!*

*Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid!*

In his book *Love Wins*, Rob Bell suggests, “*What you believe about the future shapes, informs, and determines how you live now*.”[[4]](#endnote-4) If we believe in that future of which Jesus speaks, a future shaped by resurrection promises and by living hope that endures against all odds and all things, then how should we live in the present, in our isolated, social-distanced, viral present? We should live, suggests the writer in 1 Peter, with joy because we hold that living hope! *Rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy*, he writes. It is joy captured in a boatload of alleluias not only at Easter but throughout the year. It is joy expressed in the grateful applause that echoes from doorsteps and balconies and streets for the work of all those caring for patients amid this pandemic. It is joy that makes the best of a bad situation – even this bad situation – to find touches of God’s grace in our midst in the work of artists and musicians who create paintings and concerts online to ease our pain in these viral times. It is joy expressed in the spectacular blossoms that have brightened the world all around us this spring. It is the joy of familiar faces popping up on Zoom, and Chris’ preludes echoing from these walls on Facebook Live, and calls from family and friends just checking in.

There is a lot of suffering in our world these days, a lot of death and disease lurking out there, a lot of change demanded of us and forced upon us; that is the reality. These are times that try our souls and test our faith and challenge our faithfulness. What you believe about the future will indeed shape how you live now. What then do you believe? How then are you living day to day, hour by hour, minute by minute these days? “Believe in me,” says the risen Jesus. “Believe in me and do not be afraid. Believe in me and dare to hope. Believe in me and live with joy, with glorious joy, with resurrection joy, for this virus too shall pass.” And when it does, none of us will miss it! Amen

1. Ron Byars, “Won’t Jesus Miss Us?”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, April 13, 2020, p.25 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brian Wren, “Christ is Alive!”, st. 2, 1968 rev. 1995 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his family from Tegel Prison, April 25, 1943 (Easter Sunday), *Meditations on the Cross*, Bonhoeffer, p.75 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, HarperOne: New York, 2011, p.46 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)