

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 4, 2021
Easter Sunday**

HOPE LIVES

1 Peter 1:3-9

Easter Sunday a year ago (April 12, 2020) was “An Easter Like No Other.” We were just a few weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. It *was* like no other Easter any of us had ever experienced in our lifetimes. Because of the pandemic, we weren’t able to gather at church to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord Jesus last Easter. We worshiped as a church family via live-stream only. Only our Worship Support Team was physically present in the church building.

By the grace of God, we have come a long way since then. Church life is still not the way it was in pre-COVID days. Social-distancing protocols are still in effect. We are not yet back to our pre-COVID attendance capacity in the church building. Many of our small groups and classes continue to meet virtually. But we are meeting for Worship in person, in addition to live-streaming our Worship services for those not able or not yet ready to return to church in person.

The past 12 months have been a time of incredible hardship as well as great progress. In the US, there have been more than 550,000 COVID-related deaths since the pandemic began, including more than 10,000 here in Virginia. Some of you have had the virus and know its effects personally. We thank God for your recovery. Some of you have lost family members who died after contracting the virus. Our hearts go out to you in your loss. Directly or indirectly, all of us have been affected by the coronavirus, by the changes and disruptions it has brought to daily life.

On the positive side, the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines is something of a medical miracle. There is still a long way to go. I know some Americans will choose not to receive a vaccine. But so far, 58 million Americans have been fully vaccinated and 102 million Americans have received at least one dose of a vaccine. Daily life *is* returning to something more resembling normal, even if we wish it were happening more quickly.

Nevertheless, here we are, by the grace of God, on Easter Sunday 2021. Has there ever been a time when we have had a greater need for the Easter message of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and the living hope to be found in Him?

* * * * *

THE OBITUARY OF JESUS

Here is a question for you: Have you ever wondered what an obituary for Jesus might say, if it were to appear in a newspaper today? Here is how an obituary writer for *The New York Times* thinks it might have been written:

“Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean carpenter turned itinerant minister whose appeals to piety and whose repute as a healer had galvanized a growing contingent of believers, died on Friday after being crucified that morning just outside Jerusalem, only days after his followers had welcomed him triumphantly to the city as ‘the anointed one’ and ‘the Son of David.’ He was about 33.

“For a man who had lived the first three decades of his life in virtual obscurity, he attracted a remarkable following in only a few years. His reputation reflected a persuasive coupling of message, personal magnetism, and avowed miracles. But it also resonated in the current moment of spiritual and economic discontent and popular resentment of authority and privilege, whether wielded by foreigners from Rome or by the Jewish priests in Jerusalem and their confederates.

“Jesus seems to have been universally respected as a wise man whose appeal for mercy, humility, and compassion reverberated powerfully....

“His father’s name was Joseph, though references to him are scarce after Jesus’ birth. His mother’s name was ... Mary, and because he was sometimes referred to as ‘Mary’s son,’ questions had been raised about his paternity.

“He is believed to have been the eldest of at least six siblings, including four brothers ... and (at least two) sisters. His survivors include his mother Mary, his brother James, and a number of other siblings.

“... After running afoul of the Jewish elite in Jerusalem for blasphemy and his arrest on Thursday, Jesus was sentenced to death by Governor Pontius Pilate. (The Jewish authorities lacked jurisdiction to impose capital punishment.) The charge, in effect, was treason, for claiming to be King of the Jews or ‘the anointed one’ (*Messiah* in Hebrew and Aramaic; *Christos* in Greek).

“After he was declared dead on Friday [afternoon], he was buried nearby in a cave. On Sunday, his disciples reported that the body was missing.”

(Excerpted from Sam Roberts, “Jesus of Nazareth, Whose Messianic Message Captivated Thousands, Dies at About 33,” *Vanity Fair*, 3/25/2016.)

You’ve got to admit: It is an interesting and creative way of summarizing the life of Jesus. But, of course, it doesn’t tell the whole story. It doesn’t include Jesus’ claim to be God. It doesn’t include the central theme of Jesus’ teaching – the call to repent, believe the good news

of the kingdom of God, and follow Him. It doesn't include the vicarious nature of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross – that He took *our* place and died for *our* sins. Nor does it include the earth-shaking news of His resurrection from the dead. Yes, Roberts acknowledges that when the followers went to the tomb on Sunday morning, it was empty. The body of Jesus wasn't there. Perhaps the obituary went to press before news of His resurrection got out. In which case the newspaper should have updated the story.

PETER AND THE RESURRECTION

Peter was in the perfect position to update the story. He witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. He went to the tomb on Easter morning. He saw for himself that the tomb was empty. He saw the risen Jesus with his own eyes. He walked with the risen Jesus. He heard the voice of the risen Savior. He experienced not only the forgiveness of Jesus for having denied Him three times, but also the extravagant grace of Jesus in restoring him (Peter) to a place of ministry as one of His apostles.

Peter knew both the reality and the power of Christ's resurrection. He knew that Easter begins where we should all begin – with praise to God. Nowhere in the Bible are the joy and hope of Easter expressed in such a rich and beautiful way as in 1 Peter 1:3-4: "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, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you."

There is a lot to chew on in these verses, a veritable buffet of spiritual blessings to feast on – great mercy, a new birth, a living hope, and an eternal inheritance in heaven. At the heart of them all is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus changes everything.

If the resurrection didn't happen, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, we who believe in Jesus are "a pretty sorry lot" who deserve to be pitied (15:19, *MSG*). If the resurrection isn't true, if Jesus is still in the grave and the resurrection is a false hope, he says, we may as well just "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," and that's all there is to it (15:32). But Paul knew (because he met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus), and Peter knew, that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They knew that Jesus rose from the dead through what Hebrews 7:16 calls "the power of an indestructible life."

GREAT MERCY

The resurrection of Jesus reveals God's great mercy. Mercy, like grace, is totally undeserved. If you deserve it, it isn't mercy. Mercy can be defined as compassion or forbearance shown to an offender or to someone who is subject to your power (www.merriam-webster.com). If justice means getting what you deserve for something you've done, mercy means you don't get the punishment you deserve. Mercy is at the heart of God's saving work. In Ephesians 2:4-5, after explaining how and why we are all deserving of God's judgment, Paul says: "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved." *The Message*

says: “Immense in mercy and with an incredible love, (God) embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on His own, with no help from us.”

This same truth is echoed in Titus 3:4-5, where Paul says: “When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared” – that is, when Jesus came – “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy” (NIV). “It was all His doing; we had nothing to do with it” (*MSG*).

In the midst of his lamentations over the demise of the kingdom of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah could still rejoice that:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning.
(Lamentations 3:22-23a, ESV)

The word “new” is the Hebrew word *hadash*, which means never before experienced. Which is to say, God’s mercy is fresh and new and different every single day, and it is perfectly suited to our need.

Try a little exercise (you may need pencil and paper to do this, or a calculator): Figure out how old you are, not in years but in days. (Don’t worry about Leap Days!) If you’re 10 years old, that is 3,650 days. If you’re 20, it’s 7,300 days. If you’re a little older than 20, like I am, the number will be a bit higher. When you get to 65, the number is 23,725.

Once you figure out how many days you have been alive, you will know the number of mornings in which God has showered His mercy – His *mercies*, plural – on you. (Adapted from Mark Batterson, *If: Trading Your If Only Regrets for God’s What If Possibilities*, 61.) Every one of His mercies is undeserved. You don’t deserve them and you never will. But God “mercies” us freely, because that is just the way He is: He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Psalm 103:8, ESV).

At Easter we see and celebrate the great mercy of God revealed in both the death and resurrection of Jesus our Savior.

NEW BIRTH

The resurrection of Jesus also demonstrates His power to give us a “new birth” through faith in Him. When we come to Jesus in trusting faith, when we believe in Him and His saving power, we receive a “new birth into a living hope” (1:3). We are born again – spiritually – as Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3. If you are in Christ, Paul writes – if you believe in Him, if you trust in Him and Him alone to save you from your sins – you are “a new creation; the old has gone;” you are a new person in and through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In the words of Leith Anderson, it’s like getting “an advance jolt of our own future resurrection. It’s a fresh start. A new beginning. Just as we were once born physically, we are now born spiritually. Our sins are forgiven.” Hallelujah! “The past is left behind us. We get a

new birth certificate recorded in the files of heaven” (Anderson, “Easter: The Benefits Package,” www.preachingtoday.com, March 2010).

I hope you have experienced this new birth. I experienced it when I was 11 years old. You may or may not remember the particular date of your new birth. Knowing the date is not the important thing. What matters most is knowing that your faith in Jesus is real and alive.

If you have never experienced this new birth, let me tell you how. The first thing is to admit that you are a sinner and that you need a new beginning. Admit that you are a sinner who needs a Savior and that you cannot save yourself. Second, believe that Jesus died on the cross for you and rose from the dead on Easter. Trust in Him to forgive your sins, and begin to follow Jesus as your Savior and King. Take these steps in faith and you will receive this new birth today. What better day to be born again, to be made spiritually alive, than Easter Sunday!

A LIVING HOPE

But the resurrection of Jesus offers more than just a new birth or a new life. It brings us hope. A *living* hope. A hope that *lives*. A child explained hope this way: “Hope is wishing for something you know isn’t going to happen.” Is that all there is to hope? Is it just wishful thinking?

No way. That is not what the word “hope” means in the Bible. It is not what Peter means when he talks about having “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” In the Bible, hope is a strong confidence, a settled assurance, a full and complete certainty that God *will* do what He has promised, that God *will* fulfill His good and gracious purposes, that God *will* bring to completion the redeeming, transforming work He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6). You can count on it. It is not merely wishful thinking or wistful longing. It is something you can be sure of.

This living hope is rooted in the resurrection. The death of Jesus on the cross on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Sunday are the defining moments of all defining moments in all of history, and provide the sure and certain historical basis of our hope as followers of Jesus.

Jeff Jeremiah -- he is the Stated Clerk of the EPC (for those of you who aren’t familiar with our ecclesiastical lingo, the Stated Clerk is like the CEO of our denomination); he is also a graduate of West Springfield High School (class of 1972) – wrote recently that this “living hope” we have in Christ makes a difference in our lives in at least three ways. Listen to what he says:

“First, hope that lives gives you courage to face the challenges and trials of life. We’ve certainly faced enough of them in the past year! You need not cower in fear, for you know at the end Jesus is victorious over the greatest enemy to life. In Him, you will be, too. If He has solved the problem of death, you can be sure He has taken care of all the other problems,

difficulties, and trials we face. In John 16:33 Jesus said: “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart: I have overcome the world.”

“Second, hope that lives gives you confidence because you know who is in control. The resurrected Christ is not only alive at this moment – He is alive in power and glory! The sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords is in control of creation, in control of human history, and yes, in control of your life. Because of what He did for you on the cross, in love – giving His life for you – you can know that He is personally, positively, and passionately committed to you. You can be confident because you know His purpose for you is good, for He declares: “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

“Third, hope that lives in your life gives you comfort in the face of death. You are freed from the fear of death, because you know that as Jesus conquered death, so too shall you. That victory will usher us into an eternal life” – the inheritance in heaven kept for us – “that is glorious, where in the presence of God you will enjoy praise and peace, love and joy. There will be no more pain, no more tears, no more sorrow, no more death. This is the living hope that can be yours because the tomb is empty, because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead!

“There is a reason why hope is described in Hebrews 6:19 as ‘an anchor for the soul,’ firm and secure” (Jeff Jeremiah, “Easter Means Living Hope” www.epconnection.org, April 1, 2021).

As it says in *The Message*: “We who have run for our very lives to God have every reason to grab the promised hope with both hands and never let go” because “it’s an unbreakable spiritual lifeline” (Hebrews 6:18-19).

THE ANSWER IS EASTER

Because Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, we have a living hope to inspire us and sustain in the midst of all the hardships and heartaches of this life. Let me share with you something Rick Warren said. Warren is the pastor of a mega-church in southern California, and the author of *The Purpose-Driven Life* (which we studied as a church shortly after it was published almost 20 years ago now). Several years ago Warren and his wife Kay suffered a devastating loss when their 27-year-old son Matthew took his own life after battling depression and mental illness for years. What a tragic, painful thing for any parent or any family to go through. A year or so after their son’s death, Warren said: “I’ve often been asked: ‘How have you made it? How have you kept going in your pain?’ And I’ve often replied: ‘The answer is Easter.’

“You see, the death and burial and resurrection of Jesus happened over three days. Friday was the day of suffering and pain and agony. Saturday was the day of doubt and confusion and misery. But *Easter* – that Sunday – was the day of hope and joy and victory.

“And here’s the fact of life: You will face these three days over and over and over in your lifetime. And when you do, you’ll find yourself asking – as I did – three fundamental questions. Number one, ‘What do I do in my days of pain?’ Two, ‘How do I get through my days of doubt and confusion?’ Three, ‘How do I get to the days of joy and victory?’

“The answer,” he says, “is Easter. *The answer ... is Easter*” (Lee Strobel, *The Case for Hope*, 56-57).

Because Jesus lives, hope lives. The resurrection of Jesus resurrects hope in our lives and makes it alive in us. The resurrection of Jesus means that we can face uncertain days because He lives. It means that we can face the final enemy – death – without fear, because we know the final enemy has been defeated and does not have the last word. Jesus does!

So, let us sing and shout our “praise ... 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, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Lord, let it be so, now and always. Amen.