

Hope

Welcome to Trinity Cathedral on this beautiful Easter Day. We are glad that you are here, for whatever reason – because you're back home, visiting, a regular, used to be a regular – for whatever reason you are here, welcome, and thank you for being here. This would not be the celebration it is without your presence.

I also want to thank the choir and musicians for providing beautiful music and the many people who make our services work, from ushers to acolytes to lectors to Eucharistic ministers, and Father Sinclair, our Curate, who labored to organize everyone. I especially want to thank the members of the Altar Guild, those who make the sanctuary of this cathedral so gorgeous by sweeping and polishing and putting everything in place.

Every Easter is beautiful here, yet every Easter is different, for it has been a year since we last had this celebration. This year, in particular, I find myself thinking a lot about hope, looking for hope, yearning for hope. I do that because it was a hard winter, a late and long winter. We are still suffering from its effects as snow melt from the north continues to flood downtown Davenport. What we have here is nothing compared to what western Iowa and Nebraska experienced, however. The immense fire at Notre Dame Cathedral a week ago shocked everyone, even though such fires in timbered roofs were common at the time that cathedral was built. I'm grateful that we have smoke detectors installed in our own cathedral and the fire department is only a few minutes away.

This past winter our church community lost an unusual number of members. Recently I realized that I have participated in or attended nearly a dozen funerals in the last six months. And then there is always our seemingly intractable political situation, where name-calling and scapegoating have become a way of life. Is it any wonder I have been thinking about hope?

In a lifetime of reading the Bible, I've come to realize that every human feeling and desire are contained within it. The psalms contain many laments that essentially say "where are you, God?" as well as outbursts of joy like the one we heard this morning. Perhaps the most astonishing statements of hope in the midst of misery are found among the prophets.

We heard one this morning. The passage from Isaiah was most likely written after what was left of the Jewish people had finally returned from exile, hundreds of miles away. When they returned they found their Temple in Jerusalem destroyed. They struggled to rebuild it, wondering whether God had abandoned them. Were they no longer the chosen people? Where could they find hope?

The prophet gave them God's astonishing words: I am about to create a *new* heavens and a *new* earth, God said. Instead of ruins, Jerusalem will be a joy. Lives will be long, food will be abundant, and labor will be a joy. Especially note that last point: this is not the endless leisure of retirement, what we might think of as joy, but joy in the labor of one's hands! And when we hear that the wolf and the lion will eat plants instead of other animals, it sounds like a return to the Garden of Eden, the time when God saw everything as good. It is clearly a message of hope.

So is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. St. Paul certainly thought so when he wrote his letter to the church in Corinth. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, there is no hope. But in fact Christ *has* been raised from the dead, Paul wrote, and from that fact we will all be made alive in Christ. Death has been overcome – not yet destroyed, but death no longer has the final say.

Curiously, the gospel accounts of the resurrection say nothing about connecting Jesus with *our* resurrection. That came later. There's also nothing about "after you die you go to heaven" – in fact, it's hard to find that at all in the New Testament. Instead, the gospels have a similar message: Christ is risen, so now you have work to do. I'll come back to that in a minute.

The British bishop and theologian N.T. Wright – that’s Nicholas Thomas Wright, by the way, not “New Testament” Wright, as my son once suggested – N.T. Wright points out three other strange features of the gospel accounts. First, there’s what he calls the strange silence of the Bible. Everywhere else in the four gospels, the Bible is quoted to show that all happened “according to the scriptures.” Not so with the resurrection narratives, as though they are oral accounts from eyewitnesses passed down to the next generations.

The second odd thing is that women are the first and principal witnesses. In the ancient world, women weren’t considered credible witnesses, whether we like that or not. We heard an example of that today. The male apostles thought they were telling an idle tale. At least Peter hedged his bets and ran to see if they were right. Why would anyone put women in the story unless that’s the way it was?

Thirdly, the portrait of Jesus is peculiar. He appears to have a normal human body, walking and talking and eating broiled fish. Yet he is not immediately recognizable, and he passes through locked doors.

All of these features together—combined with the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances – convince me that this is not a made-up story. I firmly believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. I say that not only as a priest but as a card-carrying scientist who spent many years of teaching biology.

But where is hope in this? In his book *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright has this to say:

Hope is what you get when you suddenly realize that a different worldview is possible, a worldview in which the rich, the powerful, and the unscrupulous do not after all have the last word. The same worldview shift that is demanded by the resurrection of Jesus is the shift that will enable us to transform the world.

In the passage we heard from Luke, there is a clear tension between the present realization of what is – Christ has died – and future hope – Christ is risen, Christ will come again. The Gospel of Luke will end with two men encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and Jesus’s commandment to the apostles to stay in Jerusalem “until you have been clothed with power from on high.” That occurred at Pentecost, fifty days from now. Pentecost begins volume two of Luke’s narrative, the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the Church, just as Luke’s Gospel is the story of Jesus.

The work of the Church – the work of us gathered here this morning – is to transform the world. You didn’t know you were signing up for that when you came, did you? We transform the world by restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ, as our catechism says. We do that by proclaiming hope in the midst of destruction, by showing love in the midst of hate, by seeing the face of the risen Christ in *all* whom we encounter, especially in the faces of those with whom we most strongly disagree or who are very different from us.

It all starts here, in this beautiful place, where we are reconciled to God and one another, where we take in the Body and Blood of the Crucified One who has died, but yet is alive. So welcome. We are glad you are here. Be filled with the light and love of God. Be filled with hope. Then go out and transform the world.

[Easter Day: Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12. N.T. Wright talks about the strangeness of the gospels in pages 53-56 of *Surprised by Hope*.]