

We were discussing in the adult Sunday school class last week the disturbing situation of a town in Wales, near Gwynneth's hometown. This town is experiencing an epidemic of teen suicides over the past year. Our question was why? What is happening to make these young men and women take their own lives? Our conclusion: a loss of hope. They have lost all hope and where there is no hope there is no sense of future and when there is no sense of future: hopelessness.

What is our hope? The last four weeks we have been looking at the four resurrection stories found in the four Gospels. We have looked at them from the perspective of "fear" and have noted that in combining the four stories all aspects of fear are present. From the knee-knocking, downright being scared, to the fear of the unknown or of tomorrow. We also have seen how fear is closely connected with awe...standing amazed at what God has done. These are stories of hope. They bring a sense of hope to the fear/awe that is taking place in the lives of those involved in the story. They bring new hope in the midst of a tragic situation and the unknown of tomorrow. They empower the future.

The disciples are at the place of not knowing what their future holds. All seemed lost on Good Friday and we can only imagine what they were thinking on Saturday. They were mourning their loss and trying to contemplate what the future holds. What will we do now? We have placed all our hopes and dreams in this man Jesus and now... In essence they have bet the farm. Some have left their jobs in order to follow this young rabbi. They had placed all their hope in him and now... They had thought Jesus was the answer, the Messiah. Now they don't know what to think. Where do we go from here?

If we are honest we have all been in that situation from time to time. We have been in the place where we don't know what to do next and we are not sure what the future holds for us. This congregation has faced that question within the past couple of years. If the search committee did their job correctly (and I feel they did) they asked you this very question (in some form): "Where do we go from here?" But we have also struggled at times in our own lives with the same question. We know how the disciples felt. We know what it is like to not know where to go from here.

In our New Testament text Paul is writing to the congregation in Corinth. Now this is a congregation that would be described as "difficult" at best. There is envy, jealousy, strife, and division over leadership. They are even leaving the celebration of the Lord's Supper drunk! And, now a group or someone is challenging the validity of their belief system. How can you believe in the resurrection of the dead? How can you place your hope in the resurrection of Jesus? Who here witnessed the event? What hope do you have? Do you realize how crazy this is?

Paul counters with the affirmation: Christ has indeed been raised. There is no argument about this in Paul's mind. If we go back to verse 5, we read that Jesus was seen by Peter, the other disciples (plus 500 or more at one time) and lastly he has been seen by Paul himself. If this is not true the Corinthian congregation and all people are to be most pitied. They are believing a fairy tale. Paul concludes they would be worse than those who have no hope at all. But do not despair, Christ has been raised. Our hope is based on this simple, fundamental truth—Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Paul speaks with authority—I have seen, I have met him.

Let's go back to Ecclesiastes for a moment. (Now if you are going to read this book you need to read the whole book, not just a chapter or verse at a time—it all leads to the conclusion—an examination of life.) The writer says that we should stand in awe before God. God has provided. If you want proof look at it this way... look at the works of your hands. There is something about the things our hands have made. Remember the old television commercial: the young girl meets dad at the door and proclaims they're having "Shake and Bake and I helped!" We applaud the works of our hands, the product of our nurture or care. The writer seeks to move us from our marvel over the works of our hands to the works God does. Just look at what we are able to accomplish and then ask who gives us this ability?

I thought of Joni Erickson Tada. Joni in her teens was injured in a diving accident. She was paralyzed from the neck down. The rest of her life has been spent in a wheel chair, dependent on someone else for her every need. Yet, she draws the most detailed and beautiful sketches and paintings. She uses a pencil or brush that is placed between her teeth. (She makes those of us with two hands and no talent envious.) She has found hope in what most of us would label a helpless situation. At the end of the first movie produced on her life she appears on the screen in her wheel chair and says something like: "I would rather be in this wheel chair the way I am and know Christ than to be able to walk, swim and run and not know him." We stand in awe before our God in such moments.

This for me is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is trying to accomplish as he sums up life with this conclusion: "*Now all has been heard: this is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments*" (12:13). Here is your hope. It is not in things, positions or other earthly honors, but in God. Imagine how much greater our hope is because of Christ and his resurrection. For we could not keep the commandments and yet we still have hope because of resurrection.

The resurrection story should AWE us. It reminds us of the fullness of God's love and the hope that is ours. We were once a people without hope but now we have the promise of a new hope. It is called faith. Faith must be experienced and we must believe in the impossible. It is a faith that flies in the face of what many deem impossible. Now who would want a reasonable faith? If it was reasonable it wouldn't be faith would it? Faith is the belief in the impossible—resurrection. The awe of God's presence—not seeing but believing. The assurance that the story is true...Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

Paul was one who had moved from unbelief to belief. He was so sure of the falseness of the story of the resurrection and the church that he dedicated his life to rid the world of anyone who would believe in Jesus. He was antagonistic toward the Gospel, to say the least. He spent part of his life throwing in prison anyone who claimed to believe. I am sure the church was praying for God to get rid of Paul. They had heard the rumors of the hate in this man and how he was out to destroy the church. God, you have to get rid of him.

So, what does God do? We would probably opt for a lightning bolt to be placed appropriately in Paul's path and for Paul's dispatch to his eternal "reward". I mean, isn't this how we often pray for those who are anti-faith... just get rid of them God. However, God has a different plan—God changes Paul's heart. God meets Paul and gives him a new hope, resurrection.

Maybe there is a lesson to be learned in this. Our task is to change the heart. Our task is to help people come and meet the resurrected Christ. When they meet Christ their hearts will be changed. Changing the heart will change the world. It will not come in the passing of laws, etc. It will come in the changing of hearts.

We have this new hope—how will the world know it if we don't share it. Dave Roberts, writing in the First Baptist Church of Yakima newsletter, "Hope is harnessing God's gift of imagination to faith. It is the willingness to let God do it his way in his time." Resurrection is unleashing God's power in the world through us: giving the world a new hope.