



“From Despair to Hope”
Scripture – John 20:1-18
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 16, 2017 (Easter)

The scriptures may deliver the *message* of the Easter story, but there is nothing like the music for capturing the *spirit* of the day. Paul pulls out the stops on the organ to proclaim the celebration, the trumpeters herald the news of victory, and Harvey pounds the timpani like God pounds down death and despair. It is the holiest day on the Christian calendar and no celebration can be too dramatic for declaring that God snatches life out of death.

The Greek Orthodox, who usually seem a bit too pietistic for me, let loose when it comes to celebrating Easter; at least that is what Camilla and I experienced on the island of Patmos, where John was imprisoned and wrote the Book of Revelation.

Their Easter service began at 11 o'clock on Saturday night, and when the clock struck midnight, boys began setting off firecrackers just outside the doors of the sanctuary. These were no common firecrackers. They were three inches long and their blast was deafening. Not only did their bang jar us, but smoke filled the sanctuary. Apparently, smoke alarms have not yet made an appearance in Greece!

Within minutes fireworks were lighting up the night sky over the island, bursting in vivid colors. Then, after the final volley of fireworks, someone on a distant part of the island began setting off – I kid you not – *dynamite*. Every 15 minutes or so you would hear the enormous explosion. What joy and exuberance!

That prompted my thinking on how we might add a little punch to our Easter celebration next year. I will need to fly under the radar on this one – and if you're sitting next to a trustee, please cover his/her ears – because I think next year we should fire a cannon on the front lawn! That would raise the dead, wouldn't it?

Easter begs for drama and celebration and music that set our souls soaring because this is the day we stake our claim on hope. Life can hurl darkness our way, but we never pronounce last rites on hope. Or do we?

Will Willimon reflects on Ta-Nehisi Coates' powerful book, *Between the World and Me*, which laments the intractability of racism in America. Coates reprimands his fellow African Americans who speak of hope, because he sees little possibility of ever overcoming the evils of racism.

Remember Martin Luther King's quote on justice? “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Coates declares, “There is no arc...we are night travelers on a great tundra...the only work that will matter, will be the work done by us.” He thinks hoping that God will lead us to a better day is tantamount to a cruel fairy tale.¹

Do you remember the story of Pandora's Box in Greek mythology? After Prometheus stole fire from heaven, Zeus punished humanity by giving Pandora a box as a wedding gift. However, she was never to open it. Of course, if you give someone a box and tell her never to open it, what will she do? Sooner or later, she or he will pop the lid. When Pandora opened the box, harmful spirits escaped into the world – greed, poverty, misery, and the like. She closed the lid just in time to leave one last spirit in the box. What was it? Hope.

Most people interpret this to mean that despite Zeus unleashing all of these horrors on the world, Zeus also gave us the most important thing to keep us going – hope.

Scott Black Johnston points out that there are some who do not buy this interpretation. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche “argued that hope is the gods’ final revenge on humans. ‘However much human beings might be tormented by the other evils, Zeus did not want us to fling away our lives, but **to go on** letting ourselves be tormented again and again.’ [Naively hoping for something that would never happen]. The philosopher claimed that hope is actually the **worst** of all evils and the source of our greatest suffering. His advice? Leave it in the box, toughen up, and learn to live without it.”²

But isn't living without hope what turns people cynical and despairing? Isn't that why the suicide rate in the United States has surged to its highest level in 30 years?³ Is it a coincidence that it coincides with declining church attendance?

If Coates' and Nietzsche's idea of hope is passively waiting for God to do something unilaterally, then I am in their camp of despair. The notion that all we can do is pray and wait for God to fix things is a false, childish hope. God transforms the world, *resurrects* the world, *brings new life* to the world, but God does it through us.

God whispers to our souls, urging us to allow God's **love** and **desire for justice** to pulse through our veins so that we will partner with God in bringing new life to the world. The reason the “arc of the moral universe is long,” is because we humans respond slowly to the way God would have us – with compassion, justice, generosity, humility, and peace. The reason the arc “bends toward justice,” is because God never tires of urging us to respond with our best. It takes a long time, but once enough hearts and minds are won over, justice prevails. Slavery is no longer acceptable in the civilized world, the status of women has dramatically improved, and conversion by the sword is anathema. The moral arc of the universe is indeed very long, but it finally does bend in the direction of justice.

However, the hope generated by Easter is not only the large, communal hope that life in this world will get better, it is also the individual and very personal hope that each of us can live a rich life despite the trials and losses we suffer.

You know what it is to grieve a loss – the loss of a loved one, a position, a marriage, a friendship, a healthy body. You may recall a time when you wished you could rewind the film and return to the time before the bottom dropped out. This is where many become mired. They cannot bear to face their loss. Some are afraid that if they allow the tears ducts to open, they may never close again. The pain may be more intense than they can bear. Others believe that if they refuse to acknowledge the loss they can hold it at bay – the adult version of pulling the covers over your head.

Like Mary Magdalene and the disciples, when your picture of the future is erased – when the life you were counting on is no longer possible – it can paralyze you. When it is impossible to imagine what life can be, your confidence is shattered and your steps are tentative.

When Jesus was executed and his limp body poured into a rock hewn tomb, it devastated his followers. When the huge stone was rolled across the entrance, it sealed the grave and appeared to seal their future in darkness. But something dramatic happened. They experienced the risen Christ. They caught a glimpse of life after death and their lives were radically changed forever.

The *crucifixion* of Jesus is a powerful expression of the boundless love of God. Neither intense suffering nor death can smother God's love. The *resurrection* of Jesus demonstrates that God's love is the power of transformation that calls forth new life. This new life happens after we die, but is not limited to our physical death. It is always present beneath the surface beckoning us to a rich life despite the losses – the inevitable losses – we experience.

The story of Mary encountering the risen Christ also reminds us that grief and joy intermingle. You do not have to end grieving before rejoicing.

Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. She was grieving not only the loss of her teacher, but the loss of her compass, her rock, her purpose, her hope. It seemed her entire life was shattered in a swift and violent miscarriage of justice.

Then she encountered the risen Christ. At first, through her blurry vision, she believed it was just the gardener, but then a familiar voice called her name, and the radiance of the sun shined brightly.

Both grief and joy can exist simultaneously. Human emotions bleed into one another. Seemingly opposite emotions can exist side-by-side. At memorial services we can witness family members with tears streaming down, smiling with joy as they both grieve and celebrate their loved one, and hope for a future reunion.

Easter is the premier day on the Christian calendar because it boldly declares that the last word does not belong to death, but to life; not to darkness, but to light; not to despair, but to hope.

We dare not give in to cynicism and live as if we are trapped inside a tomb with a heavy stone covering the entrance because we are resurrection people, called to lean into a future alive with possibilities.

NOTES

1. Will Willimon, "Resurrection and the Courage to Confront Racism," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2017, p.3.
2. Scott Black Johnston, "Hope: At the Bottom of the Box," April 9, 2017.
3. Sabrina Tavernise, "U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016.