

## “Hope – Not Despair”

June 21, 2015

*Marked for Life in Christ series*

*New birth into a living hope.* Powerful words from a powerful letter. Powerful promises from our powerful God. Powerful words as we stand in the midst of a despairing world. What we witnessed this week in Charleston was evil where racism and violence ruled the day. No regard for God who is Creator of all and who loves all. No regard for life. No hope. And the result is deep grief over the loss of life.

Preaching on hope in the midst of real despair falls flat at first. When we hear of terrible violence and death in a place where it should be safe, where we take for granted that it's safe to pray and sing and worship, that's despairing. We grieve with those who grieve. We get angry at the disregard for humanity. It feels hopeless.

I feel despair over racism and gun violence. I also realize that I have no idea what it means for brothers and sisters whose skin color is darker than mine, but whose heart belongs to Christ just like mine – to experience this violence – not just in Charleston, but every day. I don't know what it's like, but I must care and I must respond. If we are to be people of faith, hope, and love, then more than ever, it matters that we're engaged and aware. It matters that we stand against anything that would seek to squash those marks of the Christian life: faith, hope, and love.

To witness those whose loved ones were killed even attempt to speak of forgiveness was overwhelming. That is living hope that goes beyond our understanding and comes from God. John Wesley is clear that living hope is from God – not something we have from ourselves or own strength.

To even speak forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ? How do you and I look at ourselves in light of that act? That's an act of faith, hope, and love. It's far from easy. It's far from over, but to even witness to a Lord and Savior whose love and life go beyond what you and I can attempt or imagine on our own – that was a moment of living hope in the midst of despair.

Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting. Living hope doesn't mean overlooking and going on without acknowledging that there is a problem. We must pray for healing and hope, for comfort, for peace, for changed hearts and an end to racism. We must pray for hope – not despair. We must cling to living hope that God gives and calls us to live into.

Last week, we talked about FAITH - that the opposite of faith isn't doubt, but fear that can show itself as apathy and discouragement. We said that sometimes we cling to someone else's faith because we need it. I felt like that this week as I listened to people

speak of forgiveness and grace. HOPE is a product of FAITH, and sometimes we see it in others before we fully understand it.

First Peter is a letter to Christians in Asia Minor written in the 50's or 60's of the first century. Some say it was especially for newly baptized Christians because it wasn't an easy time to be a Christian. The suffering Peter talks about is tied to persecution that many faced because of their belief in Jesus Christ. They experienced hostility from family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Their new-found faith brought division and pain, and they needed encouragement to keep their faith. They needed to rest and rely on the peace of Christ.

And peace is a vital part of our faith. Even though we aren't direct witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, we love him and trust in him – and we have a deep joy and peace that doesn't waver even when we face – death, grief, illness, brokenness, pain, despair.

And we have hope – not just optimism or longing that we might think of as hope. But this living hope - that even despite sin and death, even when we know that both sin and death are still very much a part of our world, Jesus conquers them. And in him and through him, we have an opportunity to overcome them, too. We hope in the promise that he will restore our lives and our world to peace.

But even still with this living hope, we aren't off the hook. It's not neat and tidy today. It wasn't neat and tidy for the early Christians either. How do we carry this living hope?

Peter is a prime example. Peter denied Jesus even after he was so certain that he'd be faithful to the end. What a story – to go from fearful to faithful – even becoming a leader in the early church! Peter is a reminder that God brings new hope when we don't think there are any possibilities left! Peter goes from someone who runs away from truth to someone who acts on truth and ultimately loses his life for truth.

To talk about the power of faith over fear and the power of hope over despair falls flat in the midst of such tragic and terrible news. To face the undercurrent of racism that is alive and well, the reality of gun violence, and the call to be honest about the need for change even in ourselves is just plain hard.

But that's the call: to be people of unwavering hope that God is working to bring us to a better place even as we grieve racism and its devastating effects. We fight despair every day by believing that hope is real and does exist in Jesus Christ. And we even make the bold statement that we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation in the world - and that we're a part of bringing hope and living hope in this world right now.

Living hope is a strong, confident expectation that rests not in what we can do, but in what God can do. Even in suffering, there's an outcome more than what we can see right now. Something better is coming! God gives us new birth into a living hope – not because we deserve it, but because God is merciful and God knows how desperate we are for something to hold onto.

So hear these words from Bishop Adam Richardson of the AME Church: “The doors of the church are still open” and “our faith looks up to Thee” and “will not shrink though pressed by every foe.”

“The evil one wanted a race war, instead there came an outpouring of love, sympathy, and tears from people of every race; and fervent prayers offered for [the assailant by the people he had wronged]. With shock and anger still wafting in the air, family members amazingly spoke words of forgiveness, and the community sang together and spoke of hope. We have learned at least this much in our walk with God in Christ...”

We can hold onto a lot of things for hope – money, possessions, addictions that give us false hope, bad relationships that bring us down. But what God offers is an inheritance –something we haven't earned, but a gift we've been given out of God's abundant love for us.

And God gives a living hope. Is there any other kind of hope except a living hope? There are times when we've been “dead-hope” Christians. We've walked around and talked about hope, but we haven't really grasped it deeply in our souls. The joy of hope from God hasn't been easy for anyone to see. That peace from Jesus isn't too visible. But living hope must show itself powerfully in how we respond to despair – not overlooking it or ignoring it, but believing that we have work to do to transform the world.

Jesus offers his presence to us through the Holy Spirit. And we trust in our encounters with the risen Christ through worship, prayer, and service. We trust in the presence of Christ in one another. And we claim that living hope - not just saying that we have hope, but doing something with the hope that we have in our hearts.

This living hope is rooted in resurrection – in believing that resurrection was the beginning of God's new creation, and we have work to do. God cannot be stopped from offering new life. It is a gift for us to receive. It is a gift for us to claim. It is a gift for us to trust in no matter our circumstances.

God continues to exceed our expectations. N.T. Wright says that God calls us “to be amazed by the power and love of God but to draw down that power and love, through prayer and the Holy Spirit, so that we can be Jesus people for the world, kingdom people for the world, forgiveness people for the world.”

So will we let God move us to living hope? Can we be strong witnesses to God who does do the work of bringing hope where there was none and bringing peace when we cower in fear and struggle with doubt?

We can't truly know living hope if we put rely on our own strength. We have to be "all in" to experience living hope. We have to lean on God and acknowledge God's power to bring new life out of death and despair even when we feel powerless. When we face something that seems impossible with no answer or solution, we hope in God who makes a way that we cannot see. If we feel pulled to despair, we can put our hope fully in God whose love is steadfast and sure – and for you and for me.

*New birth into a living hope.* Powerful words. Powerful promises from our powerful God. Will we live by hope – not despair? Will we hope beyond what we can see and hope in God – that God is still in the business of resurrection, of new life? May God continue to give us hope – not despair – as we seek to follow faithfully.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.