**What is Hope?**

**Text: Romans 8:18**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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One of my favorite camp songs is a call and response number that I’m sure some of you know. It’s called *I’ve Been Redeemed*. So, call and response: I sing a line, and then you sing a line. Sing it with me if you know it. It goes like this:

I’ve been redeemed/I’ve been redeemed

By the blood of the Lamb/By the blood of the Lamb.

I’ve been redeemed/I’ve been redeemed

By the blood of the Lamb.

I’ve been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb

Full of the Holy Ghost I am.

All my sins are washed away,

I’ve been redeemed.

*All* my sins are washed away. Yeah, well, not quite. At least, not in history; not fully. Like a lot of camp songs and gospel songs and some of the stuff that’s really fun to sing, the theology is a bit suspect.

Now don’t get me wrong. We have indeed been redeemed, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And our sins are *being* washed away; but the process isn’t complete yet. It *will* be complete *someday*! Therefore, key to the process of salvation is *hope*.

Today we conclude our sermon series that began with the question, “What is Sin?” And then we asked “What is Salvation?” Our question today is, “What is Hope?” But really the *whole series* has been about salvation because salvation, you see, is a *process.* It begins with God’s election through Christ of all the saints in eternity, it continues when each of us sinners hears the good news of God’s love, and it concludes with the resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

I mean, we have been saved. This is clear. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). That’s what we heard St. Paul say last week. But even the saved continue to sin. Even the saints have to get down on their knees and seek forgiveness. The good news is that we *are* forgiven. The good news is that there is cleansing power in God’s forgiveness. Our sins *are being washed away* as we journey toward that day when all the children of God will be raised in the fullness of time, in that twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, when Paul says we will be clothed with imperishable, spiritual bodies, and sin and death and suffering will be no more.

This is the glory for which we hope. This is the glory of which Paul speaks when he says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). Now, Paul’s timeline was a bit off. He was expecting the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead and the end of sin and suffering in the near future; perhaps even in his lifetime. That was the hope of the early Church. 2.000 years later, we are still waiting; still hoping. But from the perspective of eternity, those 2,000 years aren’t even a blip. As the psalmist prays,

“A thousand years in your sight

are like yesterday when it is past,

or like a watch in the night” (Psalm 90:4)

Or, as the great hymnist, Isaac Watts, expressed it:

“A thousand ages, in Thy sight,

are like an evening gone;

short as the watch that ends the night

before the rising sun.”

We live in hope!

Yale Professor H. Richard Niebuhr was walking down the street in New Haven, Connecticut one day when he was verbally accosted by a street evangelist. “Have you been saved,” the evangelist demanded to know. Dr. Niebuhr calmly responded,

“I have been saved, I am being saved, I shall be saved.”

Dr. Niebuhr, and all of us, have been saved in eternity through the gracious choice of God; we are being saved in history as we experience the redeeming love of Jesus Christ; we shall be saved at the end of time when redemption is complete.

It is that hope for the completion of salvation that keeps us going. Not only my salvation, not only your salvation, but the salvation of the whole world; the salvation of all Creation. For salvation is much more than an individual concern. The whole of God’s Creation is trapped in sin, evil and death. Natural disasters such as tornadoes and hurricanes, the violence of animals consuming each other up and down the food chain, the burden of injustice and the threat of nuclear war: these are all examples of the sin that grips the whole Cosmos. All Creation is fallen! And all Creation will be redeemed. Paul says, “Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). This is the promise that God has made to *all* of God’s children. This is the hope in which we are saved.

Let’s look at this hope as if through a prism, breaking out the light of hope into 3 of its component colors: Resurrection, Inheritance and Sight.

First, there is the biblical promise of Resurrection: the dead will be raised and the process of salvation will be complete.

The Resurrection of the Dead has been at the heart of Christian hope since the earliest days of the Church. This is God’s promise that death does not have the last word; that our physical death is not the end of the journey. Our physical bodies die in this world, but we are raised in spiritual bodies in the world beyond. This is the hope that we proclaim at Christian funerals. “Lo, I tell you a mystery,” Paul says. “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed: in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For our perishable bodies must put on imperishability, and our mortal bodies must put on immortality” (1 Cor.15:51-53).

“Our mortal *bodies* must put on immortality.” We’re not talking about the immortality of the soul here. We’re talking about some form of *bodily* resurrection. The distinction is important. The immortality of the soul is the concept of everlasting life that most of us carry around in our heads. It’s the notion that when our bodies die we leave them to be buried in the earth, while our souls wing their way to heaven. That’s what the Greeks thought, and that’s what even preachers imply – myself included – when we bury our loved ones, but that’s not what the Bible says. The Bible says that when you’re dead, you’re dead. Or at least, when you’re dead it’s like you’ve fallen into a very deep and a very long sleep. And you’ll remain that way until the end of time. But, *at* the end of time, the dead will be *raised*. Death is not the end of the story. In what the old spiritual calls “that great gettin’-up mornin’,” God will raise-up all of the saints and clothed them with spiritual bodies. From the perspective of history that day is a *long* way off, but from the perspective of eternity – which is like a single, transcendent point from which every point on the historical timeline is equidistant – from the perspective of eternity, it all happens instantaneously. On that great gettin’-up morning at the end of time, God will raise-up all the saints and welcome them into the Kingdom of Heaven. With open arms God will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.” Everlasting life, you see, isn’t something that we’re entitled to simply because we’re human beings. No, the resurrection of the dead is the final gift of a gracious God. We are neither entitled to everlasting life because we somehow have immortal souls, nor do we *earn* everlasting life through our good deeds. On the contrary, it is God’s gift. Like the entire process of salvation, it is a gracious gift from a compassionate God.

The notion of the resurrection of the dead actually predates the Church. It is a Jewish concept that has its roots in the persecution of righteous Jews at the hands of the Greeks and the Romans, starting several hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The Holy Land was occupied by first the Greek and then the Roman Empires, beginning in the 4th century BC. And, like any other occupying army, they exploited and raped and murdered untold numbers of innocent civilians. These were good people, righteous people, faithful people. And, of course, the cry went up, “If God is a just and loving God, why are the innocent and the righteous being killed?” And then folks got to thinking, “Maybe these innocent victims will be vindicated in the end. Maybe God will raise them up beyond history, and defeat his foes, and put an end to injustice and sin and suffering forever.” That hope was a key part of the faith of Jesus and his disciples. And so, when Jesus was raised, his disciples saw that as the first instance of the promised resurrection of all of God’s children. They saw that as the first example of the vindication of God’s justice. So the resurrection of the dead is really an affirmation of justice; *God’s* justice. The Doctrine of the Resurrection acknowledges that innocent people suffer in history, but it vindicates the justice of God in eternity. As Jesus suffered on the Cross, so all of God’s children suffer. As Jesus was raised from the dead, so all of God’s children will be raised. Indeed, the sufferings of this present age can’t even be compared to the glory that God will someday reveal to us!

This hope of Resurrection is our inheritance. It is the promise of God to all of the elect. And that’s the second aspect of Christian hope: Inheritance. The promise of eternal life with all the saints in God’s Kingdom of love, justice and peace is a gift that God *will* give us. Not because we deserve it, but because God is gracious. Paul underscores how undeserving we are by suggesting that we’re not even God’s children yet. It’s as if we are still waiting to be adopted by our Heavenly Father. And waiting is hard! Paul says, “We groan inwardly as we wait for adoption.” We groan inwardly as we wait for “the redemption of our bodies.” We’re like foster children. We live as part of God’s family, but the adoption process is not yet complete. We’re like foster children, yet we’ve already been written into the will. Doesn’t that underscore how amazing God is? We’re still foster children, but we’ve already been written into the will. God will graciously gift us with the inheritance in God’s own time. The outcome is not in doubt. It’s just going to take a while. In the meantime, we live in hope.

It takes a lot of faith to live in hope; because it’s something that we cannot see. And that’s the third color in hope’s glorious light: Sight. “Hope that is seen is not hope,” Paul says. “For who hopes for what is seen?” If we can see it, that it’s no longer hope, it’s reality. But any reality that we can see in history falls far short of the glory that we hope for in eternity. And so “we hope for what we do *not* see, and we *wait* for it with patience” (see Rom 8:24-25). Except that it’s hard to be patient. When we think of the future glory of reunion with our loved ones, and reconciliation with God, and the end of war and injustice and exploitation and poverty and all of the manifestations of sin; when we imagine that glorious future, we’re like little kids – foster kids – on Christmas Eve. And not just any Christmas Eve, but a German Christmas Eve, in the morning, when the tree isn’t up yet and there are no decorations and no presents and no nothing! There’s nothing to be seen. And yet we hope. And we groan in our impatience. It’s like we’re not even fully part of the family yet, but we dare to hope that there will be presents under the tree for you and me, and so all of us wait with glee! We dare to hope because we believe that God is merciful and gracious and abounding in steadfast love. We dare to hope because we believe that God will be faithful to God’s promises. We dare to hope because the Holy Spirit has already spoken to us – in scripture and in sermons and in our own hearts with sighs too deep for words – the Holy Spirit has spoken to us and promised us that death will be no more, neither will there be mourning nor crying nor pain nor poverty nor sin anymore, for these former things will have passed away.

We can’t see it; but the hope is so real that we can celebrate it, even now. It’s kind of like a football game back in 1982: the Michigan State Spartans were playing the Wisconsin Badgers on the road in Madison, and Michigan State was just *hammering* Wisconsin. I mean, anyone could tell that the Spartans were going to win that football game. But every once and a while, the Badger fans would let out a cheer. You know, Michigan State would be moving down the field for yet another touchdown, and the Wisconsin fans are cheering. Folks couldn’t figure it out: what are those Badger fans cheering about? Turned out that the Wisconsin fans were listening on their radios to the 3rd game of the World Series, and the Milwaukee Brewers – another Wisconsin team – the Brewers were just hammering the St. Louis Cardinals. Yes, in the game that they could see their team was getting creamed. Bu they were tuned in to a different frequency – a *higher* frequency – a frequency that could not be seen. That frequency didn’t deny the suffering that they could see on the football field, but it transcended that suffering and pointed to another reality. And they were celebrating! Even in the midst of suffering, they were celebrating!

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” If we can see that glory at all it’s only through a mirror dimly; but when the dead are raised, we will be able to see that glory face to face. Now we know it only in part, then we shall understand it fully, even as we are fully understood. And because we are fully understood – by a gentle and gracious God – we are accepted, we are forgiven, we are redeemed, we are saved! Sin and injustice and death have been vanquished forevermore. For with St. Paul I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all Creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Risen Lord (Rom. 8:38-39). This is our hope. Thanks be to God.