

“INTO A LIVELY HOPE”
I Thessalonians 4:1-12, Revelation 21:1-8, John 11:17-27
May 4 & 5, 2024

“W. Y. Fullerton tells of climbing the mimic Calvary of the village of Domodossola in northern Italy. In ascending order up the hillside, a series of chapels had been built, each depicting, with life-size terracotta figures, one of the scenes of Jesus’ Passion - Jesus before Pilate, Jesus shouldering the cross, and so on. The climax was reached with the chapel that showed Jesus hanging on the cross, and up to this point the path running between the shrines was well worn by the feet of countless pilgrims, come to look upon their Lord’s sufferings and death.

“But now the path became grass-grown and was clearly little used. Dr. Fullerton, however, followed on, and, reaching the summit of the hill, found there another shrine, the Chapel of the Resurrection, which few, it was clear, took the trouble to visit. Those who built that mimic Calvary had not forgotten that Jesus rose from the tomb, but most of the pilgrims came to pay homage to a Christ who, so far as they were concerned, was dead.” (James Martin)¹

As we move on in our Easter celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we indeed need to remember that on the cross Jesus paid the price for our sins, but more importantly, **that He rose again** on the third day to release us from the death of this world, into eternal life with Him in heaven. That is what Easter is all about, the **Risen** Christ Jesus!

But Easter also calls us to determine what we are to **do with Jesus’ victory over** sin and death. Do we merely remember His Passion, celebrating only that our sins are forgiven, to live in this world as believers, only focused upon Jesus’ death? Or do we fully embrace His new life given to us in His resurrection, so that we can continue to live the lively hope that there is more to this life than just merely existence? If we are Resurrection People, we must get our minds away from the everyday here and now, and begin to look beyond the existence of this human body to what God has already prepared for those who believe in Jesus Christ. We must look to what it means to have eternal life.

¹ (Charles L. Wallis (editor), *Lenten-Easter Sourcebook*, [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961] pg. 182, #378)

And even more, “Our chief concern on any Easter day is not so much that we should have unmistakable proof of our immortality, or of the resurrection of Jesus, but our question ought to be, ‘What difference does belief in immortality make to us in our everyday life?’ After all, we are not angels. We are living in a world of tragedy. We are human beings with all the limitations that our humanness implies; we are living in a world where good is, and where evil threatens us on every hand.

“We could get out of the world by means of suicide. But most of us do not want to do that, we prefer to live. And so long as we prefer to live, we seek a means whereby we can make the human spirit triumph over all the forces set to defeat it. It is not so much a question as to whether we can believe in miraculous events, but rather whether we can believe in a moral miracle which can happen within us to lift us above the [everyday essentials] of life and to inspire others with that same belief.” (Frederick K. Stamm)²

That’s what the Apostle Paul invited the believers living in Thessalonica to do. He says, “...we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more...It is God’s will that you should be sanctified...For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (I Thess. 4:1, 3 & 7). Paul calls us to be such living examples of holiness that people around us see it in us without us saying a word. We are to be so excited about being a follower of Jesus that everything we say and do reflects our hope beyond this world to the marvelous things that God has waiting for us. And we are to be about helping those around us also find these same truths in their life that they might join us in eternal life with Jesus. We are to live “a quiet life...minding [our] own business and work with [our] hands...so that [our] daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that [we] will not be dependent upon anyone” (4:11-12).

But remember that this is **not** your home. Earth is not our final destination when we are followers of Jesus. God has bigger plans for us. When the final days arrive, and we are taken up to be with the Lord Jesus (I Thess. 4:13-18), God has plans for a “new heaven and a new earth,” (Revelation

² (Charles L. Wallis (editor), *Lenten-Easter Sourcebook*, pg. 188, #391)

21:1) where *“God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”* (Rev. 21:3-4).

Everything will be brand new, with no sin to distort or malign God’s order or purpose. All the brokenness of the world will have been destroyed, and the whole world will be redeemed and purified so that God can once more be with us, and we can worship Him and honor Him for the mighty things He has done for us. Those who keep their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and follow His ways and live lives that bring glory and honor to the Lord God Almighty, will live in such indescribable beauty and righteousness and peace and glory as it was in the very beginning when God had first created all things.

The Apostle John is told by God in his revelation, *“Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be My children”* (Rev. 21:7). That’s the hope that is for us as we have Jesus as our Savior and Lord in our lives. God delights in the very best for us, but we must keep our faith and trust in Jesus and not wander away from Him, or become persuaded by the things of this world of anything contrary of what God has said.

God is a holy and perfect God, and can tolerate nothing impure in His presence. Therefore, *“the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death”* (Rev. 21:8). So if we can even hope to be with God in His recreated perfect world, we must keep ourselves pure and holy through the power of Jesus’ sacrificial blood, and the Holy Spirit’s strength given to all who trust in Him.

I don’t know about you, but this is fantastic news! It is the greatest hope any human can have in their life! But we have to have faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, remain true to His teachings, and strive to do our best to honor and glorify Him in all we do and say. This is truly something worthwhile to live for! How exciting it will be!

The problem is, though, that we still live in this old world full of brokenness and strife. We live in a world full of corruption, full of self-centered people striving for whatever they want, even seeking the destruction of God's people to get what they want. We live in a world where everything has been turned up-side-down, where right has become wrong, where justice has become unjust, where holiness has become profaned, and where God is replaced by the worship of anything else. We are surrounded by the impure, the imperfect, the wicked and evil, and it is so hard to keep ourselves from falling for the lie that we should just get with it and follow what the world says is true.

But God desires that we live pure and holy lives seeking His will and His ways in all that we do. God wants us to have such faith in Jesus that our hearts and minds are solely focused of being His witnesses of the glory about to be revealed to us. Despite all the ugliness and wickedness and chaos and strife around us, let us keep our minds and hearts and spirits focused on Jesus, and let our joy in Him be evident in all that we do.

You see, "ordinarily, we tend to identify hope with good times. But if we are attentive to the Gospel message, we notice that the great prophets voiced their spirit of hope most eloquently, not in good times, but in bad. That's when hope comes hardest - and when we need it most."³

"There was a piano teacher at a University Music Department whom the students simply and affectionately called 'Herman.' One night at a University concert, a distinguished piano player suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. No sooner had the artist retired from the stage when Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked onstage, sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance (right from where the other musician had left off).

"Later that evening, at a party, one of the students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully without notice and with no rehearsal. He replied, 'In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might

³ (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, [Pleasantville, N.J.; Voicings Publications, 1982] pg.240)

someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare-board bed late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire, and I did this every night for five years. It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was part of that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom.”⁴

Herman kept his hope in playing the music within him, he kept practicing that music, and when the time came for him to play it, the performance went perfectly, even without a moment's notice. His constant practice kept him ready to play the music in his heart.

We are also called to keep our trust and faith in Jesus, practicing every day the teachings Jesus puts into our hearts, so that at any moment, we, too, can step up and live in that faith so that we might bring honor and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. Even in the midst of tremendous struggle and hardship, persecution and strife, we are to keep our hearts set on the hope that is before us so that we do not waver during difficult times.

Jesus modeled this as He brought hope into the lives of the sisters of Lazarus. When Lazarus got sick and died, the faith of the sisters, Martha and Mary, was shaken to the very core of their being. Listen to how it is recorded in John's Gospel, chapter 11: 17-27. (READ John 11:17-27)

In the face of death, Jesus brings hope. Death is **not** the victor of life - Jesus is the Victor over death for all who believe in Him. When all hope was lost for Lazarus, even when he had been in the tomb four days, Jesus brings hope. Martha believed Jesus could do all things and says to Him, *“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask”* (John 11:22).

She, and Mary, and Lazarus had all put their hope and trust in Jesus as the Messiah. But in the face of the death of Lazarus, hope had been replaced by sorrow and grief because of the “certainty” of

⁴ (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, pg. 235-236)

death's finality. But Jesus gave Martha and Mary hope even in the midst of physical death. But He had to reinstate their faith first so that they could be the living witnesses of the amazing hope that only Jesus gives to us.

So Jesus tells Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die"* (John 11:25-26). What an outstanding statement! Jesus is the One who is victor over death! He is the resurrection and life for all who will believe in Him. But the most important thing was Jesus' question to Martha, *"Do you believe this?"*

You see, we can have all the information we want about Jesus being our resurrection and life, but the key is Do We Believe It? And do we believe it enough to put our trust in Him doing the most radical thing in our life to help us believe? Jesus didn't just let Lazarus stay in the grave with the sisters' hope of his being resurrected with Jesus into heaven. Jesus physically raised Lazarus out of the grave, even after being dead for 4 days! And in His raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus proved that not only was He Lord of the Sabbath, but He was Lord of All, and He had the power to give life to those who believe in Him.

What hope we have in Jesus! The Apostle Paul asks, *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered' (Psalm 44:22). No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us"* (Romans 8:35-37). So we are to keep our hope in the Lord Jesus and always be ready to *"give an account of the hope that is within you"* (I Peter 3:15).

So let us learn from an amazing woman, the late Muriel Lester. "As a teenager she quit the busy round of social life in London and rented a humble room because she wanted to serve the poor. Out of this small beginning came 'Kingsley Hall,' a rehabilitation center that has restored health and hope to a great many people.

“Because Muriel Lester especially was concerned about the problem of alcohol, she built Kingsley Hall in the midst of an area containing no less than thirty saloons. She was so effective at bringing rehabilitation and hope to others that people came from all over the world to study with her, and to learn from her.

“As she moved into advanced years, her concern about our world-situation deepened. A letter she wrote to a friend in the U.S. reflects this. She wrote, in part:

‘How can the world recover? Is it moving its last time around the sun? I know God has other worlds and, probably, wonderful beings, managing better than we to preserve their world from the absurd super-sensitivity and pride that start us grumbling and pitying ourselves - and resenting others so much that eventually it leads to the murder and torture of children via war. I will interrupt this letter while I get ready for Church. I must not hurry at all - ever - else the pain comes. What a lot we learn as our bodies grow older and more stubborn! But what a wonderful increase of joy and serenity!’

“This excerpt reflects a deeply sensitive Christian woman’s concern about our world and her feelings about the end of the world (which the Bible talks so much about). But the really poignant thing about the letter is the postscript, added by her nurse. It reads, ‘Half an hour after writing this letter, Muriel Lester died. She was writing about the end of the world not knowing that while she wrote, she was making her own last turn around the sun.’

“But these concerns were always against the background of shining hope. Three years before her death, Muriel had experienced a severe heart attack. The doctor gave her an injection, with little hope that she could survive. But with a visible burst of energy, she opened her eyes, looked quizzically around and winked at him - a sign that all was well. In another of her last letters she said:

‘How marvelously sufficient are God’s ways! He turns the temptation to despair to a sense of harmony and joy. He turns even the palest shadow of that demon, self-pity, into new and delightful experiences. He turns the outworn experiences of silly little personal regrets into total and grateful acceptance of life.’

“And then she cried out:

‘God save this beauteous and precious planet from destruction! GOD IS ABLE!’”

“What a joyous example this is of our Lord’s teaching on the end time. As His followers we are never without hope. Even when we are making out last turn around the sun.”⁵

There is such hope for us as we put our trust and faith in our Risen Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Each one of us must go through and endure our own trials and struggles, but as we keep our hearts set upon living for Jesus, each day we will have the opportunity to feel His great love for us, and find the lively hope that He has for us. In the darkest of times is where hope shines out the brightest. So we must practice our faith, stay ready to remember the many beautiful things that the Lord Jesus has done for us, and remind ourselves each day that He walks along side of us and provides us the strength to endure whatever comes our way. And when this life grows weary, and our journey ends, we will live into that lively hope of being with our Savior and Lord Jesus in eternal life in heaven, in that place that God has already prepared for us.

Never give up! Always live with the hope of Jesus Christ so that you might keep that lively hope He has to offer. And don’t forget to share it with those around you, so that they might find and live into their own lively hope, through Christ Jesus our Savior and Risen Lord. Let’s pray.

Father, thank You for being an Awesome God! Thank You for giving us these lives that we have. Even though many of us are plagued with aches and pains, sickness and brokenness, You have overcome all of them through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our loving Savior and Risen Lord. Give us the courage each day to see beyond the hardship in our life, to find Your beauty and glory surrounding us. Open our eyes, Lord, to see the hope that we have in Christ Jesus, that as we remain faithful to Him, we have nothing to fear, not even death itself, because He has beaten death, and given us new life. Encourage us to live in Your hope each day, so that in the midst of our troubles, we find Your marvelous presence. Let Your Holy Spirit move among us so that we feel His presence and find His power with us. Then, let us live with such lively hope that demonstrate to all those around us the value of having Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord of our lives. This we pray in Jesus’ powerful and mighty name. Amen.

⁵ (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, pg. 234-235)