

Date: April 8-9, 2023

Title: *Embracing Hope*

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-19

Speaker: Kurt Bjorklund

Good morning and Happy Easter. It's great to be together in the Strip District, Butler, Wexford, Chapel, Online, and especially in Southpointe, where our launch group has actually moved into a new location. And we're hoping that that will turn into a community gathering in the days ahead. It is good to be together.

Let's pray, Father, as we come to this moment, we come from a lot of different places and experiences, I pray that in these next moments, we would hear from you. That my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and in emphasis. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

About a little over a week ago, a shooter walked into a school in Nashville, Tennessee, and executed three children, the head of the school, a substitute teacher, and somebody from their operations team. It's a horrific event that unfortunately is all too familiar. In fact, it's so familiar that in some ways when you hear about it, you're horrified.

And ten days, fourteen days later, you're onto whatever's next in the news cycle. But when you hear that, there's a little piece of me that says we should live in a world in which you can send your kids to school and not have to worry about whether or not they'll come home that night.

But that shooting wasn't just another shooting. This one was targeted. It was a Christian school, and the shooter was a former student who from most accounts, appears to have disliked the message of the school and some of the things that we're taught. And so, it was targeted. And there's a piece of me when I hear that that says, I wish we lived in a world in which groups that feel at odds with other groups don't call for violence and execute violence toward others.

And certainly, you could look at what's going on in our broader world in Ukraine, and the devastation of some of those cities and some of the kids that have been taken from Ukraine into Russia. And you could say, I wish we lived in a world where there wasn't war. Where kids weren't taken from their homeland to another place.

And when you see China's exercises around Taiwan and the unrest in Israel, you may think our world is maybe coming to an end of its somewhat peaceful era. You might think with me, I wish we lived in a world that didn't have war. Even in our country, where there has been relative peace and a lot of prosperity and opportunity, there's still inequity, an opportunity based in many cases on economics. Maybe you're like me and wish we lived in a world in which the zip code that you grew up in didn't make such a difference.

Maybe it isn't just global things. Maybe for you this week, this month, has been full of some bad news, maybe a bad diagnosis, maybe a loss, or maybe a heartache around your family or your career or your opportunities. And you say, I wish I lived in a world in which these things weren't so hard, where there wasn't the pain and heartache.

Well, Christianity stands as the message of hope. The message of Christianity is that Jesus rose from the dead. And it makes all the difference in that he brings hope. And today we're starting a series that we're calling Embracing Hope, and we're going to look at First Corinthians 15 and 16. It'll be the end of what had been most of a year of looking at First Corinthians. And in these weeks, we're going to examine this idea of hope and why Christianity brings hope.

In First Corinthians Chapter 15, we'll be teaching today from verses one through nineteen. Verse 19 says, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." And the idea that Paul, who is the author of First Corinthians, says here is that if our hope is just for this world, if there's nothing bigger, then we're to be pitied because we've hoped in vain. In fact, he uses that word a couple of times in this passage.

Here's how he begins this. First Corinthians chapter 15, verse one, he says, "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand." So, he begins this section by saying, I want to remind you about the gospel.

Now, I don't know how you hear the word gospel, but my guess is you hear it somewhat like this. It's a church word that means some kind of shorthand for something about the Christian message. If you're a Christian, a long time in church, if you're not around the church, maybe that's your way of thinking. Maybe you think it's some bad music from the south or something like that. But the word literally means good news. It was the announcement of victory.

The way that the people in that culture would have heard the word gospel was they would have heard it as this is the announcement of good news, a victory for our people. It would have been news of a war that had been won securing the nation's future or news of an heir that was born, that would secure this monarch into the future.

Paul says I want to remind you about the good news of Jesus Christ because it means that in a world that feels hopeless, there is victory, there is hope, and what should be, will one day be. And then he tells us a little bit about what the gospel is. Here's what he says. Verse three of First Corinthians 15. He says, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to." And then he goes through a list of his appearances as if to say, this is a historical fact, this is something you can base your life upon. It's written in the Scriptures, it's testified to in history, and people have seen it.

So, let me ask you this. If this is Paul's take on hope, why is there so little hope in our world? Why is there so little hope even in the church? Why is it so hard, even if you're a person of faith to feel hopeful if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the announcement of victory and it brings hope?

I think this passage actually answers that question. I mentioned that there's a word "vain" that's used here in the original language. The New Testament was written in Greek initially, and so when we read it in English, it has an underlying language of Greek. There are three words that are used that are often translated with the same English idea. Here the New American Standard translates it three times as vain. One time is useless. Here's what I'm talking about.

Verse two says this, "If you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." So, that's one of the uses of it. Here is another word in Greek. I'll explain this all in just a moment. Verse ten says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. Some translations say it's not vain here, empty, useless. Verse 14, "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless." Again, some translations say "vain." Then verse 17, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."

And so here we have three different Greek words for English occurrences. So, two times it's the same word in Greek. And this is his way of saying your hope, your belief is worthless, it's pointless. It doesn't produce what you want it to produce. And so, here's what I'd like to point out, and that is that each of these words, three of them, I think, point to reason that we often find it hard to hope.

And the first, I'm just going to say is in verses 1 and 2 and it's believing and not continuing. The Greek word here for vain is the word "eike." And the reason I say that is when you learn a different language and you know English fairly well, you anticipate what the Greek word would be. At least I do when I read it, and I would have anticipated it was "kenos." That's the word that's used in verses 4 and 14. And I had to look up the word "eike." It was used seven times in the New Testament, and it means without purpose. Linguist William Donkor says it means without consideration. And what this is pointing to in verse 2 is he's saying if you hold firmly, if you don't hold firmly, then your belief is in vain. You won't have hope. Your belief won't have an impact.

And here's what's happened maybe for some of us. And that is there was a day when we came to believe the message of Christianity, the message of Jesus Christ crucified for sins according to the Scriptures, resurrected according to the Scriptures, and raised to new life. But something happened, there became a fog around us, and it became hard to believe. Maybe we experienced a loss. We saw evil in the world. We prayed for something, and it felt like God didn't answer our prayer. And so, we say my belief isn't as strong as it once was.

And in a church like Orchard Hill, where we stand in the reformed tradition, we would rightly say that ultimately the Christian message isn't about how much we hold on to God, but how much He holds on to us. But in the New Testament, you can't escape the fact that persevering in faith is a thing, that faith is never about a past decision or a prayer that you prayed somewhere but it's always a current reality. And so, when somebody has faith for a season and then ceases to have faith, however you want to categorize it, it means that we start to lose the benefits of that hope.

The same idea is true in Luke chapter 8, which is the parable of the soils. In verse 13, it talks about some of the seeds that are sown, and it says that it's like one who receives with joy but has no root. And it's common, as it says you believe for a while, but in a time of testing, they fall away. Some of us find ourselves in a fog. And what we need to do is we need to look back at the reality of the resurrection.

I'm not a deer hunter, but I've been told by especially bow hunters that when you shoot a deer, often the deer will run for quite some time. You have to track the deer through the woods until it collapses, and then you drag it to your car and can harvest the meat or whatever it is that deer hunters do.

And what they'll often do is track the deer and come to a place where they can't see where the deer is because the deer is faster than they are. And so, they're trying to track it. Sometimes there'll be a trail of blood, but they'll lose the trail. But what they do, the ones who are experienced, is they'll just put a little piece of toilet paper or something on each of the trees as they go. And when they come to the point of confusion where they don't know what to do, where to go, they'll look back, and they'll be able to see the line that has been made by where they've gone. And they'll be able to look forward and say, as I go, I can follow the line of the past into the future.

Looking back in hope is looking back to the fixed event of Jesus and His resurrection when you're in the place of the fog. Whether it's caused by hardship or lifestyle choices, where you're saying, I don't want God to be in charge of me, I want to do life on my terms, my way. Sometimes that's what causes the fog. And we need to look back. If we don't look back, what will happen is we'll stand in confusion.

I was thinking about this the other day. My wife and I have this little - I'm going to call it a game that we play. It's a game that she sets up for me about once a week. It's called Find the Dog Collars. So, we have two rescue dogs. And my wife loves dogs. And so, when the little dog that we had died, she was on what I called "Doggy Tinder" within a few hours. And so, she's on there looking for a new dog.

I've told her this doesn't bode well for me when I die. She's just going to be like, you know, how quickly can I find somebody else here? And she didn't just find one dog. She found two. And my deal with her was, okay, look, I didn't want dogs again. I was like, this is too much work. I don't want dogs. I'm good. And so, the deal was we'll get the dogs. You're 100% responsible. I'm 0% responsible. That hasn't worked out.

But anyway, we have these dog collars and a little perimeter around our property, and the dogs go out to the electronic fence. And so, she'll let the dogs out at night, usually because it's her job, 0% mine. Then she'll come in, take the dog collars off, and place them somewhere around the house for me to find in the morning. When I

get up, I usually get up before her, I'm usually up at 5:30 or 6:00, and I have to take the dogs out. So, I'm looking for these collars. And about once a week they're not in the bedroom on the dresser. They're not on the counter in the kitchen. They're not in the cabinet where they belong. They are somewhere. Who knows where.

Now, by the way, I told the story last night. Guess what happened this morning? Find the dog collar game. Now, here's what's true. And when I get into the dog collar game now, mind you, it's 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning. The dogs need to go out, they're getting antsy. And I'm like, where is this? Every now and then the fog sets in and I start to say, my wife plays this game on purpose.

And I'd love to tell you that I'm always perfectly rational and calm, but every now and then I'll just open the bedroom door a little loud and look for the collars so that she knows I'm looking for the collars as if she's revealed some kind of character flaw. But here's what's true about my wife. She is one of the most considerate and kind people that you will ever meet. She would not purposely send me on the dog collar mission, but sometimes in the fog, I need to remind myself of that.

Sometimes in the fog, you need to go back and say, Jesus really did live. He really did die for sins. He really did rise from the dead. And if I can't see my way forward, I'm going to look back and use that as the basis for my hope.

But there isn't just that. The second word that's used is a word that you would expect in the original language. It's the word "kenos," and it means empty. It means vain, without substance, without weight, without impact. And it's used in verse 10. It's used in verse 14. And in verse 14, it says it this way. "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless." It's "kenos." And what he's saying here is he's saying the whole message without Christ is useless.

But preaching is something that you tend to associate, at least here in the word, with something similar to what's going on right now. But our culture loves to preach even if they don't use the word. And what preaching is, is it's saying be like us, do things our way, and then you'll be morally acceptable. But what Paul does here is he says without Christ, all of our preaching is worthless.

And listen to this, verses 9 and 10, and here's what I'm going to say is the issue. It's believing without amazement. Listen to Paul's words. "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

Do you know who Paul was in that culture? He was the one who went into the Christian school and executed the Christians. God called Paul from that to not just a life of faith, but to a life of service. Listen to what he says.

He says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. It wasn't "kenos." It wasn't empty. God's grace changed me. "No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed."

Sometimes what happens is we believe, but we aren't amazed. And sometimes the longer you've been on the path, the less amazed you are at God's grace because you start to think, well, God actually likes me and likes the way that I do it. God does like you, but he doesn't always like the way that you've done it. That's what sin is. And the amazing thing about God is that because of Jesus, He loves us, even with our rebellions against him.

One blogger wrote about it this way and said this. "I've never fully understood how Christianity became quite so tame and respectable, given its origins among drunkards, prostitutes, and tax collectors. Jesus could have hung out in the high-end religious scene of his day, but instead he scoffed at all of that choosing instead to befriend whores, kiss sinners, and eat with all the wrong people."

Thomas Merton put it this way. "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they're worthy. That's not our business. And in fact, it's nobody's business." See, without amazement, what happens is we start to think we somehow have earned God's favor. And then what happens is we don't have hope. What we have is this sense of either entitlement or fear, because down deep we know that we haven't really earned God's favor and that hope actually pushes us outward.

Scott Sauls writes about this in his book called *Irresistible Faith*, and after acknowledging that there are a lot of Christians who live in such a way as to bring ill repute to the name of the church and to Christ, he says this and that is that he's still optimistic. And he says it this way, "History is peppered with these kinds of lives. For example, Christians have shown groundbreaking leadership in science. Think Pascal, Copernicus, Newton, Galileo, Francis Collins. They've shown groundbreaking leadership in health care. Think of all the hospitals that are named after a saint. They've shown it in arts and literature. Think of Rembrandt, Bach, Dostoevsky, Dorothy Sayers, T.S. Eliot, Flannery O'Connor, Johnny Cash, and Bono."

I'm not sure about his categorization there. "They've shown it in the academy. All but one of the Ivy League universities were founded by Christians, and they've shown it in the areas of mercy and justice. Think of William Wilberforce, Hannah Moore, Dorothy Day, George Mueller, Martin Luther King Jr." And then he says this. "The identifying mark of the city of God is when the citizens of the heavenly city become the very best citizens of the earthly one. To be on the side of Jesus is to be on the side of the world and its flourishing."

You see, when you or I become amazed at God's grace to us, we don't work for acceptance, but we work out of amazement. And the reason some of us live without hope and we'd rather bemoan what's happening in the world than be about the flourishing of the world is because we haven't been amazed at what God has done in us in some time. See, the message of Christianity isn't come and be like us. It's come and join with others who know our neediness as we worship the God who has done for us that we can't do. It's not hope in ourselves. It's hope in the God who came to this earth as Jesus, and died on the cross and rose to life and is coming again to set right the things that are broken and hurting in this world.

There's one more way that this idea of vanity or uselessness, futility is used, and it's in First Corinthians 15 verses 12 through 19. Just listen to these words, listen to the word, "if" specifically. "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" So, this is belief without belief and this sounds like an oxymoron. But what he's saying is some of you believe in the idea of God, but you don't believe in the resurrection.

So, you have a general belief that there's a God and that one day, whatever God is like, God's going to say, if you've been good enough, then eternity is yours, but you don't have belief in the resurrection. So listen to this. Here's what he says in verse 13. "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless."

"Kenos" again, the Greek word for empty, weightless, and so is your faith. "More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile."

Last word here. It's the word "mataios," and it means in essence. Something that is utterly useless. He says your faith, if you don't believe in the resurrection, is utterly useless. And then he says, you're still in your sins.

I remember some time ago talking with a man and we're talking about hope. And as I explained kind of the idea of the resurrection in the hope of Jesus Christ, he said, yeah, I don't believe any of that stuff. And what he probably meant when he said "that stuff" is he said either I don't believe in the credibility, the certainty of the message, or I don't like the implications of it.

But what this text says is, if Christ hasn't been raised, then Christ's resurrection didn't happen. If His resurrection doesn't happen, then there is no resurrection. There is no future. When you lose a loved one, and their body is put into a box and lowered into the ground, that's the end of the story. That's not hopeful. That's not Christianity.

The message of Christianity is that those who believe in Jesus Christ have had their sins forgiven. And if their sins are forgiven, then they know that there is hope beyond this life. And it's based on this historical event that Jesus rose from the dead, and that He died for our sins so you can look back when you face those moments.

Now, I know that there will be many who are gathered here who say, I don't know. That seems like a lot to believe. But make no mistake, history tells us that Jesus lived and that it was certainly believed that he was alive after his crucifixion, which means historically you have to wrestle with it somehow. And there are different ways that some people have tried to explain it. Some have said Jesus wasn't really dead, he was just close to dead, and then he went to the grave and resuscitated in the cool temperatures. He came out and overpowered the 600-person Roman guard that was likely standing there. And they were so embarrassed that they covered this story.

But the scriptures tell us that the guards checked him for life, and they determined he was dead, so they didn't break his legs. Some have thought that perhaps the women who went on Easter Day, the first Sunday, went to the wrong tomb. But again, there was a Roman guard positioned, and it wasn't a single guard. Guard meant a battalion of people. This was a marked man. Some have thought maybe his body was stolen, but there was no way that the little band of disjointed disciples would have come together and mounted a military attack against a battalion of Roman elite trained guards. And not only that, the disciples, many of them, went to their deaths, claiming

Jesus had been raised to life, when all they probably would have had to say was, hey, just kidding, we stole the body. It's over there.

And my point is just this. And that is this is something that isn't just like a hope. When I say hope, we hear hope like we hear it in our culture. You know, the way we think about hope is like, well, maybe this will come to be and I kind of hope it's true. Like the pirates have had a good week. I hope biblical hope isn't like that. It's a fixed certainty that you can say I hope because I believe, I know. And when that's true, then what happens is you're able to say all of the hardship in our world, all of the difficulties in my own life, I can live with hope because my hope is not based on just some kind of idea, but it is based on Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

Dallas Willard wrote it this way. He said, "Our societal and psychological sciences stand helpless before the terrible things that are done by human beings. But the warped nature of the human will, the reality of sin is something we are not allowed to admit into serious discussion. We're like farmers that diligently plant crops but can't admit the reality of weeds and insects but can only put on more fertilizer."

Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, without the explanation of human evil with sin, all we can do is fertilize the problems with more economic development, more education, and hope for different results. Real hope comes because of Jesus and His promise of what will be.

George Mueller once said it this way. He said, "The Christian's chief duty is to make yourself happy in God every morning." If I can paraphrase George Mueller, maybe the Christian's chief duty is to make ourselves hopeful in God every day to say whatever is happening in this world, in my world, this isn't the way that God's world will be. The world that should be is the world that will be so I can invest in this world and in all that is now because of what will one day be. You see, Christianity isn't a bunch of people bemoaning the evils of our culture and the compromises of the church. It's people who live with genuine hope because of what Jesus has done and what will one day be.

I don't know how you come here today, but my guess is some of us are here, and we used to believe. Maybe it was our childhood faith and maybe in our grown-up years we found fog for a few years and it feels a little cloudy. Can I just encourage you to look back and say, if this is true, then it provides direction for the present, even if I feel like I'm in a cloud. For some of us, maybe it's a lack of amazement. Maybe we've

believed for a while, but we find it easier to point fingers at a shooter than to identify with Paul, who persecuted the church. And we need to be amazed once again at God's grace.

Or maybe you're here and you kind of believe generically in God, but this resurrection and the sin thing seems far from you. Maybe for you, the step is just to say there's this Objections class coming, it's virtual, and it's in person. In the next four weeks, maybe you just jump into that. Or maybe you just say, this *Embracing Hope* series is something I want to be a part of. Or maybe today you can take this step and say, I do feel hopeless, but I want to embrace hope by looking back at what Jesus Christ has done and knowing that it provides a pathway forward. And you can do that by acknowledging your sin and crawling on Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Here today, on Easter Sunday, God, we ask today that you would help each one of us to find hope in a world that sometimes feels hopeless, that you would help us to embrace hope personally when our own situations feel like they're overwhelming. Because the world that can be is the world that will be. And we know that because Jesus died on the cross according to the Scriptures for our sins, and he was raised to life according to the Scriptures, and he'll come again to make right all that's wrong. Grant us this hope in Jesus' name. Amen.