

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 12, 2009
Easter Sunday**

A LIVING HOPE

1 Peter 1:3-9

INTRODUCTION: PERSONAL TESTIMONY

I want to begin today with a word of personal testimony. Twelve years ago tomorrow – April 13, 1997 – was a momentous day in my life. The date may not mean anything to you, but on that day, I preached in this church, from this pulpit, for the first time. And that day the members of this church graciously voted to call me as your pastor.

Much has happened in the last twelve years in my life, in the life of my family, in your lives, in the life of this church, and in the world. The events of September 11, 2001 rocked our lives and changed the way we see the world. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have left none of us unaffected.

Here at Faith, God has enabled us in the intervening years to build Phase 2 – the Graham Smith Discipleship Center, the William Shirey Library and our on-site church offices – and to plant a daughter church which is meeting this morning and every Sunday in the Woodbridge area.

In my own family, in the twelve years since we moved here from Pennsylvania, my daughters Erin and Lindsay have both graduated from high school and college, and both are now using their gifts as elementary school teachers here in northern Virginia. My son Nathan was just five years old when we moved here in 1997. Now he is finishing 11th grade and is taller than I am.

And what can I say of my beloved Mary Sue? She has walked with me and stood by me and cared for me through some challenging times, especially in the last year or so as I have dealt with some serious health problems. My words are inadequate to convey how grateful I am both to her and for her, and what a gift she is in my life.

Because of my brain surgery last year, I was not able to be here on Easter a year ago. I think it was the first Easter I have not preached since 1986. Then, as many of you know, I suffered a brain injury in a fall at the beginning of April last year, which landed me back in the hospital for 18 days. That I am here today, that I am able to stand before you and speak to you this morning, is due first and foremost to the all-sufficient grace of God, and then to the love of my wife and family, and the prayers of many, many people.

I am far more richly blessed than I will ever deserve, and I simply want to give glory, honor and praise to God for all His goodness to me.

Now, let's look at God's Word in 1 Peter 1:3-9. I invite you to turn to it and follow along as I read. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word.

A TIME FOR HOPE

Easter is a day of hope. And, it seems to me, we need the kind of hope found in the message of Easter. For a lot of people, hope has taken a major hit in recent days.

- We're still dealing with the effects of the meltdown of the economy. Though there have been some encouraging signs of late, the unemployment rate is still on the rise. For some of us, it is not just a theoretical problem that affects other people. It has affected us.
- The movement for gay marriage in America is gaining momentum, with recent actions in support of gay marriage by the D. C. City Council and lawmakers in the state of Vermont. Not a hopeful sign for those of us who hold to the traditional understanding of marriage as a lifelong, loving commitment between one man and one woman.
- There have been multiple, multiple shootings in America in recent days. Every few days, it seems, there is another incident of gun violence resulting in multiple deaths. May God have mercy on us.
- Last week, in its cover story, *Newsweek* magazine announced the end of Christian America. Not the end of Christianity in America, but a marked decline in the influence of Christianity in American life. The number of Americans who identify themselves as Christians has fallen ten percentage points since 1990 (from 86 to 76 percent), and the percentage of Americans who identify themselves as unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in that time, to 16 percent. According to *Newsweek* and a number of commentators on religion and American culture, America is not a "post-Christian" nation. And the trend seems likely to continue. At least one observer, Michael Spencer, is predicting the collapse of evangelical Christianity in America as we know it. While evangelicalism is not without faults, this is not a particularly hopeful picture. If we did not believe – and know – that God is sovereign, we might easily be tempted to despair.

But Easter is supremely a day of hope. Because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on Easter morning, we have what Peter calls "a living hope" (1:3).

THE MEANING OF HOPE

Let's be honest about it. The way we often think about hope is to define it as a desire for some future thing which we are uncertain of attaining (John Piper):

- For example, we hope the weather will be good on a particular occasion.
- We hope the Nats, or the Caps, or the Redskins will win.
- We hope that Tiger will make a charge – or conversely, someone other than Tiger will win the Master's today.
- We hope everybody in our family will get along.

- We hope Congress will cut spending instead of raising taxes. (Oops, that sounded political, didn't it?)

We may hope for all of these things. But we are uncertain of the outcome. We are uncertain of the way it will turn out.

But this is not how Peter and Paul and the rest of the New Testament think about hope. It is not what Peter means when he talks about having “a living hope” through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In the New Testament, hope is a strong confidence or a full assurance that God *will* do what He has promised, that God *will* fulfill His purposes, that God *will* do good to us in the future. We can count on it. It is not merely some kind of wishful thinking or longing. It is something you can be sure of.

How can you be sure that this “living hope” has any lasting meaning or value? Because it is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is grounded in the central events of history – the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord on Easter.

His resurrection means that death is not the end of everything. His resurrection means that He is stronger than death. Stronger than anything. His resurrection means that there is an inheritance for us – an eternal inheritance that awaits us in heaven. The resurrection of Jesus means that He is alive today. It means that He is Lord. It means that His once-for-all death on the cross was sufficient to atone for my sins and to make me right with God. It means that He is worthy of my worship and praise and allegiance and obedience. Not just on Easter or other religious holidays, or in the extremities of life when we are more acutely aware of our inadequacy and our need for His grace and power, but every moment of every day, 24/7. There is never a time when He is not worthy. And never a time when we do not have a living hope in Him.

THE SOURCE OF HOPE

As Peter ponders all of this, he begins where all of us should begin, with praise to God. Notice how he starts out in verse 3: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

In *The Message* it says: “What a God we have! And how fortunate (how blessed) we are to have Him, the Father of our Master Jesus!”

What a God! What a Savior! He is the source of our new birth and the living hope we have through faith in our crucified and risen Lord. It is all from Him. The idea of a new birth boggled the mind of a respected Jewish leader named Nicodemus, who came to see Jesus under cover of darkness (John 3:1-21). He couldn't get his mind around it. He said: “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!” (3:4). He didn't understand that Jesus was talking about a spiritual birth that is the work of the Holy Spirit in a person's life.

Nicodemus is not alone. The idea of a new birth – a spiritual birth – still puzzles people today who want to dissect it or analyze it and explain it apart from a personal experience. But history is filled with the testimonies of men and women whose lives have been radically changed by the work of the Holy Spirit in giving new life to people like us who were dead in our transgressions and sins, and powerless to save ourselves, without hope and without God in the world. But God took the initiative in His great mercy and grace, and made us alive in Christ our Savior – spiritually alive to God through faith in Him.

HOLDING ONTO HOPE WHEN TRIALS COME

As a result we have a living hope – a sure and certain hope of life beyond death, on the other side of the grave. A father and his five-year-old son drove past a cemetery one afternoon, where they saw a large pile of dirt beside a newly-excavated grave. The little boy said: “Look, Dad, one got out!” The message of Easter is that there really is One who got out! The grave couldn’t hold Him. The tomb couldn’t keep Him in. And He has promised that the grave is not our final destination. In His resurrection power, the day will come when we all get out! That is the living hope we have in Him.

Not only this, we also have a hope that strengthens us and sustains us in the midst of the trials, the struggles and suffering we experience in this life. Notice what Peter says in verses 6 and 7: “In this (hope – the hope of salvation) you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These (trials) have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Are you under a lot of stress in your life? Are you going through a season of suffering? Are you facing trials of one kind or another? Welcome to the club. You are not alone. You have plenty of company. Peter says that God has a purpose for your suffering. There is a reason God sends trials into our lives. It is to test and prove the genuineness of our faith in Him. It is to purify, to refine, to deepen and to prove the reality of our faith, which is more valuable in God’s sight than the purest gold. Trials come to test and prove our faith.

In his book *Life Before Death*, Ian Leitch tells of being asked by a businessman to speak to his staff. One member of the staff asked to speak with him privately. She said: “Ian, when I was 22, I was in a serious car accident, and my boyfriend was killed. I have gone through a lot of surgery and now I am doing well. When that happened, I lost my faith.”

Ian Leitch says: “What do you say to someone like that?” He prayed, and then said, as kindly as he could: “You know, when they built the Queen Mary, the Queen Elizabeth and the QE2, they did not test them in dry dock. They didn’t leave them in dry dock and get big hoses on them to see if they would leak. They got those ships out into the open ocean to put them through sea trials. These trials were not intended to sink the ship. These trials were to prove that the ship was seaworthy. The only way you can know whether your faith is real or not is when the pressures of life come, when you go through trials. Then you know if you are seaworthy or not. Can I ask you honestly, did you lose your faith or did you find you had none?”

She said: “Ian, I guess you’re right. I had none.”

God does not send trials or suffering into our lives to destroy our faith. Never! That is not His purpose. He does give us hardship and pain and struggles to purify our faith. To refine our faith. To make our faith stronger. To test the genuineness of our faith. God does not want you or anyone to lose your faith in Him. He does want you to discover whether or not your faith is real. He wants you to learn to trust in Him when you go through trials and life is hard. He wants you to have a living hope as an anchor for your soul (Hebrews 6:19). A hope that rests in God’s resurrection power, which is at work in the world even today.

A simple question for you: Is your faith for real today?

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Before I close, I want you to see what Peter says in verses 8 and 9: “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Peter, of course, had seen Him. He had seen Jesus. He had listened to Jesus. He knew Jesus intimately. He was an eyewitness to His teaching and ministry. But not us. And not those to whom this letter from Peter was addressed (God’s chosen people scattered throughout several provinces in the Roman empire). We have not seen Him as Peter did. We did not see Jesus during the days of His incarnation, when He walked on this earth. We did not see Him nailed to the cross, bearing our sin in His body, taking on Himself the punishment for our sins. We did not see His body placed in the tomb after His death. We did not see Him in His resurrection body following His resurrection on Easter morning.

We have not seen Him in the flesh. But someday we *will* see Him. For He will come again in demonstration of His power and glory. And, as the Scripture says (Revelation 1:7), every eye will see Him. We *will* see Him and rejoice in the greatness of His grace and power. For all who know Him and love Him that will be a great day. For those who do not know Him, for those who have rejected Him, for those who have not opened their hearts in faith to receive Him as Savior and Lord of their lives, it will not be a day of celebration, but a day of sorrow and mourning (Revelation 1:7). It will be not a day of hope realized but of despair and regret.

Do not let it be a day of sorrow or mourning, a day of regret or despair for you. Take hold of the new life and the living hope God has for you in the saving love and resurrection power of the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His life *for you*, and rose again from the dead “with a mighty triumph o’er His foes” (Robert Lowry). Dear friends, do not leave here today without responding in faith to the saving work of Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, which is the source of a living hope.

His grace and power are sufficient not only to cover your sins and mine – all of them – but also to give us strength for today and hope for tomorrow as we deal with the disappointments, the heartaches, the hardships, the brokenness, the pressures, the trials and suffering which are

all part of our lot in life. He is worthy of your trust and love. And He is alive today. He is present with us. And He alone can give us a living hope, a lasting hope, as we put our faith in Him moment by moment.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – a hope that can be yours if you pray this prayer with me from the heart:

“Lord Jesus, I believe in my heart that You were raised from the dead on Easter. I believe Your resurrection guarantees that Your death on the cross was sufficient to pay for all my sins. I come to You in repentance and faith, asking You to forgive all my sins. Help me to hope fully in Your promises. In Your great mercy, give to me a living hope with the assurance of Your presence in my life. When I experience trials and suffering in life, help me to hold onto hope and to be filled with joy as I remember what You have done for me. I pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

If you prayed this prayer (or a prayer like it) from your heart, you can be sure that God has heard you and given you “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). I don’t know of any better way to celebrate Easter. If you have taken this step of faith and prayed this prayer today, I would love to talk with you about it.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

May it be so in your life this Easter and always. Amen.