

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
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Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 22, 2011  
Lessons: Genesis 11:1-9 and John 20:16-21

## HOPE FOR SHALOM

On these six Sundays of Easter that follow Easter Sunday itself, I am asking you to look with me at certain facets of our resurrection hope. The apostle Paul calls us to live in resurrection hope which differs profoundly from other kinds of hope more familiar to us from living in this world on its terms, of which I see two basic kinds.

There is the hope that misfortune will leave us alone and let us live our lives mostly in peace, good health, and enough prosperity to meet our needs and enable us to enjoy good times at least periodically in our lives. This kind of hope pursues no grand ambitions and does not really seek to dominate others but is content mostly to “live and let live.” This kind of hope is not bad but just small, narrow, and confined to the moment that passes.

There is also the more aggressive hope of people who think and scheme in terms of their prospects, and so for them pursuing their hopes means continually expanding those prospects, maybe creating some where none rightfully existed. Jesus has a rather pathetic character in one of his parables describe his boss this way: “Master,” he whimpers, “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid . . . .” We may admire people like that master for their successes because they are the ones who acquire wealth and power; we admire them, that is, until they reap where we have sown and gather from our fields.

Resurrection hope differs radically from both of these other kinds because it is drawn by faith from what Jesus teaches us are God’s own hopes and dreams for this world and its people, all of whom God loves. Christians have frequently tried to separate Jesus as Teacher from Jesus as Savior, but the distinction falsifies the Christian life. Think of parenting. Do good parents “give life” to their children but not teach them how to live it? What sense does that make? Unless giving life is reduced to the single act that gives birth, giving and teaching life are inseparable in practice. So it is also between Jesus Christ and us. Unless his giving us life is reduced to a single act of my “getting saved,” we must realize that to live is to learn and to be learning life from him is to be alive truly.

The resurrection not only overcomes the finality of death but even more importantly vindicates Jesus and the way of life he lived and taught. Easter is not primarily about *how*

*long* we will live but *how* we live and *what kind of people* we are becoming. What the Gospel of John calls “eternal life” is about quality, and that quality of life is relational, not performance-based. God is not counting up our good deeds and subtracting the bad ones. Neither is God grading us against each other so that only those above, say, the seventieth percentile of goodness make it to eternal life. God is not keeping score of our religious practices or ranking the correctness of our beliefs. Learning from Jesus is not value added. It’s not a race to the top, and with God “no child left behind” is not a phony name pasted onto a deception that will leave many behind. God really wants to leave no child behind but to heal, restore, and liberate all of us so we can love and be loved, receive life and share it. God wants the individual made whole and given life with meaning, dignity, and worth, but also families and the entire human family, communities and the whole human community. It’s right to want peace and wholeness for ourselves and those we love, but we need to think more expansively and more inclusively because God’s love is greater.

What matters to us, and how do our lives matter to God and to the human community? Jesus was crucified as a rebel and blasphemer; he was shamed as one utterly wrong about life, God, and hope for humanity. What difference does it make in us that he has been vindicated? What new and greater hopes do we now hold because of him?

Jesus causes what is known as a paradigm shift, which is the personal (and much quieter) equivalent of a tectonic shift in the earth – that is, an earthquake. The resurrection of the utterly disgraced and discredited man is an earthquake for those who put their trust in him. The plates beneath us, the foundations of our lives, shift to make us see everything in a different way, more from God’s point of view and less from our own. But it doesn’t happen all at once; it couldn’t, or it would be too much like an earthquake. God wants to expand our lives not destroy them, open our minds not shatter them, and unlock our hearts.

The biblical word for peace is *shalom*, which includes not only peace of mind and freedom from war’s destruction but also health, vitality, and even prosperity on God’s terms; but biblical *shalom* assumes that human life is relational, never isolated for the individual alone. That means God is not content that I should have peace while it is denied to you. *Shalom* is wholeness but not a self-contained, individualized wholeness of the Stoic sort that needs neither love nor sympathy with others; it is *wholeness in harmony* with other people, with the human community, with the natural world, and at the very heart of it all with God. *Shalom* without love, without justice, without the relational and communal harmony that makes life truly human is no peace at all but a delusion or, worse, a vicious lie told by the prosperous at the expense of the rest. That’s why Jesus went around healing people hardly anyone else even cared about. He reached out with God’s healing love and mercy to the most hopeless and despised or forgotten people in society. It’s not that Jesus detested the well-off

and comfortable but we all need that seismic shift in our perspectives on the meaning of life and our attitudes toward the human community and all of God's children.

If my concerns in life all revolve around me and mine then I need a small personal earthquake of some kind to shift the tectonic plates of my life. For the outcast and shamed people to whom Jesus reached out with healing and compassion, the earthquake came in the unexpected realization that God actually loved them. Ironically, for the self-satisfied, the earthquake came from Jesus' very same contention that God actually loved the people they ignored or despised.

We all need a new sense of self because on the terms of Jesus Christ, life cannot be a selfish matter of me and mine. Humanity in sin lives with the perspective of a two-year-old whose favorite words are "no," "me," and "mine." For a two-year-old child, such self-assertion is not only cute but necessary for her to develop the stable and strong sense of self she will need so she can go on to develop her relationships in life. Shalom does not require us to be weak, submissive, and pliant, but to be strong in ourselves so we can give and share ourselves with others. Self-love is meant to provide us with the strength and character to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. A world of people with adult bodies and intellects locked in the perspective of two-year-olds is a world in constant conflict. "No" to the needs of others, to their rights, and their well-being. "Mine" to earth's bounty. "Me, me, me!" to life, the world, God, and even Jesus Christ himself if I fixate on my salvation, my blessings, my hopes for heaven, my peace of mind, my health and happiness. God wants all those things for us and more, but human life is relational and God's love is inclusive, always yearning for the lost, forgotten, despairing, or left out.

Jesus makes life something to be shared and so makes justice inseparable from salvation. He makes peace a matter of harmony among peoples rather than security for one set gained by subjugation of another. Think of the earthquake, the tectonic shift, that would occur if the peoples of this earth were to accept harmony as the new definition of peace. Not sameness, harmony. Not acceptance of lesser status for the benefit of those with the upper hand, harmony. Mutual respect. Fair sharing of earth's bounty, not charity from those who have grabbed or inherited the most.

Jesus' resurrection gives us hope for true shalom, but we need to learn from him what true shalom is. We cannot accept Jesus as our Savior but ignore the radically different perspective on life and way of living it that got him crucified. Because he lives, salvation and justice are inseparable, life is relational not private, God really does love all those people out there in the world, and God's love for them is the truth that must make all the difference for us. Shalom is harmony, not walled security. Shalom is wholeness for the entire human family. It is God's hope, God's dream. Jesus makes it ours, too. Amen.