

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2011
Lessons: Jeremiah 29:10-14, Romans 8:18-25 and Matthew 7:7-11

HOPE FOR FINDING MEANING

So great is the need for hope in our world that I do not think I am exaggerating if I call it the world's spiritual hunger crisis. Believe me, I am in no way seeking to minimize or divert concern from the world's literal, physical hunger crisis. People are starving in a world that produces more than enough food for everyone, even with earth's greatly increased population. Here in the United States, the most numerous of those who go hungry are children. Hunger hurts. It also damages body and mind so that the effects of severe malnutrition are lifelong, if the victim survives. Understanding the deadly seriousness of the world's literal hunger crisis may help us appreciate the seriousness of the spiritual hunger crisis of people and populations starved for hope.

The correlations between physical hunger for food and spiritual hunger for hope are quite strong. Both debilitate a person's body and mind, making it very difficult to think clearly, to get up out of bed, to work, to strive, and even to care. The extreme of hunger is starvation; the extreme of hopelessness is despair. Short of starvation lies malnutrition; short of despair lies depression, and I believe millions of people function at some level of depression. Our crisis of hope is very real, and it is dangerous to everyone. Just as pervasive hunger can foment food riots and rebellions, so pervasive lack of hope can trigger rebellions of various kinds within a population that may appear on the surface much less needy. Without hope, people grow cynical, and whereas skepticism asks questions and probes for validity, rejecting quick fixes and superficial answers, cynicism scoffs at questions and answers alike, scorning every idea and dismissing the significance of all efforts. Skepticism says, "I don't think that will work," but cynicism sneers, "Why bother?" and, "Who cares?"

My goal for this and the five further sermons in this Eastertide season is to inquire into the ways in which Jesus' resurrection and our own resurrection hope in him change our human quests for hope in this world. Christians have most often associated resurrection hope with life after death. Fine, and we'll get to that, probably on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, but the change happens now in our present lives here on earth. Easter is not a promise put on hold. Our new life in Christ begins today not someday. So my sermons will take the form of "hope for . . .," and this morning it is *hope for finding meaning in life*. The alternatives are delusion, depression, and despair. Of the three, most people try to choose delusion and call it optimism, which is the reason I shared with you several sermons back the outcry of the

comic strip character Dilbert, “I want my unwarranted optimism back!” Our resurrection hope in Christ is not unwarranted optimism.

What meaning does human life have? We could try to avoid that disturbing question by saying much the same of life as one poet has said of poetry: “A poem should not mean but be.” So, then, we might tell ourselves that life is its own meaning, that the purpose of being alive is to be alive. Then, I suppose, the goals of life are to stay alive and to live as fully as possible, which people tend to interpret in terms of having as many thrilling experiences or visiting as many exotic places as possible. *Get all you can out of life while it lasts!* But why? Can I really satisfy myself that the purpose of my life is to absorb experiences? Sure I can share them and even help provide them for others. So maybe we enjoy a bit of life together, but what endures? What changes anything toward the redemptive? What picks up the pieces and uses them to build something worthwhile?

Countless people have decided that the meaning of an individual life comes from its legacy – what it leaves for others – or from its uniqueness in whatever way the person is outstanding and so makes a name for himself or herself. We should not sneer at either of these attempts to give a life meaning. Certainly, a legacy may include, not just wealth or power, but hearts prone to caring, teaching, self-sacrifice, and compassion that will pay forward what can never be paid back. Good teachers know that what they give their students is not a matter of lessons learned, facts memorized, and processes understood, but a greater matter of curiosity, eagerness and ability to keep learning, and willingness to share the joy of learning. Acts of compassion succeed fully, not just by lifting another person out of suffering, but by instilling compassion in that person. Jesus warns that forgiveness fails unless it makes us forgiving of others. So, legacy matters, but there is still a great sadness in thinking that legacy is all we have left of life and love.

Modern people have come to realize that for everyone an important part of finding meaning in life is self-actualization, which does not have to be selfish but must be true to the person God created the individual to become. Human life is a process of becoming -- not just earning money, amassing goods, or gaining influence but becoming. What kind of person in relation to others and to human society am I becoming? The Bible teaches us that human life is relational. Sin isolates and alienates the individual; God’s grace brings us together, breaking down the barriers that separate us and enabling us to find joy in shared life. Grace says you have something special to offer others as well as God, and that something special is you -- your very self being actualized in relational living. In everything, you are a “who” rather than a “what” -- a person not a set of outcomes consisting of successes and failures.

So, then, the knocking, seeking, and asking are not merely for blessings now or heaven later but for meaning in our lifelong process of becoming the people Christ calls us

to be. Hope is the fuel for our striving to go forward, overcome obstacles, remove barriers, and learn from our mistakes. Hope provides the energy to escape addictions, turn disabilities or setbacks into triumphs, and keep living and not just surviving from day to day.

What difference does the resurrection make? First, it proclaims that life's real meaning, when we find it, will endure because God will not let it be lost to life or death. That's important so we can believe that what really matters in life is not just a passing moment and so we can believe, further, that what negates the value of our faith, hope, and love in this world cannot have the final word. Jesus suffered the complete negation of his life and of himself as a person. His life didn't matter. It all came to nothing, except that God would not allow that negative verdict to stand. There's the message: God will not allow life or death to negate our worth as people or the meaning of our lives. And here's the call: to seek that meaning in self-actualization as people related in faith, hope, and love to God, to each other, and to God's world. When we seek the things that truly matter, we will find them and be found by them. We are not chasing phantoms. "I know," God says to the utterly defeated and deflated exiles, "the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." And what is required? "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD."

On the practical level, I believe that the best and surest way to seek God and life's meaning is to share the search with others. We're in this together, and one really cannot seek meaning in relatedness by oneself. That's a contradiction. We seek hope by sharing the need for it, by sharing the questions and frustrations, not just the answers. That's been a serious problem with Christian evangelism: we have tried to share answers without truly sharing the questions, disappointments, frustrations, and shame of it all. That's not the route Jesus took. He knows the worst of life's meaninglessness, the most painful of its negations of our worth. For our sake, he became the supreme loser. So, by the grace of God, he has become the hope of all who find themselves losers in life.

If we keep seeking, we will find. If we keep knocking, the door will open. But to turn the corner and understand why it all matters, we need to care that the door should open for other people, too. Jesus did not die for himself, and he did not rise for himself, either. We matter because we matter to him. We become like him as we let other people matter to us. Seeking only for ourselves, we will never find. Knocking only for ourselves will open the wrong doors. Jesus' resurrection validates the meaning he gave to life and gives to our lives. We are not groping in the dark, not even at times when it feels that way. Trust him, and keep seeking. God will not let the hope die. Amen.