

“Living Hope”

John 20 and 1 Peter 1

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First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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I've brought along something this morning I want you all to see. No, it isn't Mr. Rogers' sweater, although I met Fred Rogers, and I don't think he'd mind me bringing a sweater to worship on Easter Sunday. Actually this sweater belonged to another friend of mine. I bought it for him almost 40 years ago as a present. Let me tell you a little bit more about him.

He was born in 1913, the second son in a family of six. His mother was a German immigrant, his father an immigrant from Wales. He was born in Norwalk, Ohio but moved to Cuyahoga Falls for high school and graduated at the top of his class.

But it was 1931, the third year of the Great Depression. So college wasn't an option and he went to work with his father. He became a welder and repaired boilers on steam locomotives in the Baltimore and Ohio rail yard. And when he saved enough money, he opened his own welding supply store.

He did everything in that store. He called on customers. He kept the books. He made the deliveries. And he built up his business, so much so that by the time he was in his mid-30s a company called Airco decided he was too much competition and bought him out. With the money, my friend bought his first house. He took some college classes at night. And with a lot of hard work, he rose through the ranks and became a vice president at Airco.

He took early retirement at 62, hoping to travel. But three months later, he discovered he had lung cancer. And just before Easter in 1979 my friend died. He was the best friend I'll ever have. He was my father.

I remember the last time I saw my Dad. He was sitting on the edge of a bed and wearing a hospital gown. But over the gown he had on a sweater, this sweater, the one I gave him. I'll never forget that.

And if we could ask him this morning, I think the apostle John would say the same thing. I don't think he ever forgot the last piece of clothing he saw on Jesus either.

Maybe that's why the account in his gospel is so full of detail. You remember the story, don't you? Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus a member of the council, came to Pilate, John says, and asked for Jesus' body. They took it and prepared it for burial.

They used spices. And John is the only one of the Gospels to remember how much they used. Matthew doesn't tell us that, or Mark, or Luke. But John does because he knows. He remembers. So tells us. Almost 75 lbs., John says, that's how much they used.

And John remembers another detail. He remembers the location of Jesus' tomb. Matthew doesn't tell us that, or Mark, or Luke. But John does. He says the tomb was near Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified.

Details, just little details, but specific enough that most who spend the time to study the story believe John was present when Jesus' body was prepared for burial and laid in the tomb. He saw the spices. He saw the tomb. And he saw the burial clothes, the ones that were put on Jesus' body.

Now burial clothes in Israel in the first century were long strips of linen. And John saw them. He saw the linen strips. He saw the spices. He saw the tomb. And two days later, Mary went to the tomb. Had John told her where it was? We don't know. But we do know this, that when Mary saw the tomb, she saw the stone had been rolled away.

She ran. She found Peter and "the disciple Jesus loved," (that's John's way of referring to himself) and she told them, "They've taken his body, and I don't know where they've laid him."

John and Peter started running to the tomb. Now since John was probably younger and knew where he was going, he reached the tomb first. And when he got there, he stooped, he says, to look in. And the first thing he saw were the burial clothes; the last clothes he had seen on Jesus, the ones that had been put on him by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. But the clothes were just lying there.

And John's mind began to race through the possibilities. You can almost hear his thoughts. If some of Jesus' disciples had come to take the body, would they have wanted to unwrap it? No, that didn't make sense.

And if the Jewish or Roman authorities had come to take the body, would they have wanted to unwrap it? No, that didn't work either.

And if it was grave robbers who had come to take the body and whatever had been buried with it would they have taken the time to take the body with them? Once more, it didn't make sense.

So John kept trying to think it through. But while he was doing that Peter came running in. Without hesitating, he brushed past John and walked into the tomb. Startled John followed. Together they looked around inside the tomb and together they saw more than what John had originally seen.

Oh the linen cloths were there, lying on the shelf. But there was more. You see in the first century in Israel, a special woven cloth was wrapped around a person's head. Its purpose was to prevent the jaw from opening which was considered shameful. And there it was the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. John recognized it. He had seen it. But it was not with the rest of the grave clothes. It was rolled up in a separate place by itself. It was as if someone had slipped out of the grave clothes, untied the head cloth, rolled it up and set it down. "I saw," John says, "and I believed."

In other words, on that first Easter, John believed because he recognized the clothes, the ones that had been on Jesus the last time he'd seen him. He saw the clothes he could never forget.

So you see every time I read John's words, I think about this sweater. I don't wear this sweater. I usually keep it on a hanger in the back of my closet. And the reason is because every time I see this sweater, it brings back some of the sadness of my dad's death. But that's not the reason I keep the sweater. I keep it as a reminder of a promise.

Jesus promise was this. "I am the resurrection and the life," he said, "those who believe in me will live, and those who live and believe in me will never die." My father believed that promise. I hope you do too.

I don't know if you have a symbol like this sweater in your life. But I do know this. Easter is the day we remember that there is no symbol of sadness that cannot be changed into a symbol of hope by the promise of Jesus Christ.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” he said, “those who believe in me will live, and those who live and believe in me will never die.” John heard Jesus say those words and he wrote them down after Jesus’ resurrection so that you and I could understand that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is more than just an event. It is also a promise. It is a promise that gives us a foundation for a living hope.

Peter says it so powerfully, doesn’t he? “Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...”

A living hope, have you ever thought about it? Have you ever asked yourself if you have that kind of hope in your life? Today on Easter Sunday morning it’s a question worth asking yourself.

And while you’re thinking over your answer, let me tell you a story. It’s a story about a eight year old boy named Phillip. He was happy, but he was different. You see Phillip was born with Down’s Syndrome.

He knew he was different. So did his friends in Sunday School. And you know eight year olds; they don’t mind letting you know you’re different. But the teacher in Phillip’s Sunday School class taught her kids to love each other, and that meant loving Phillip too.

On Easter Sunday, Phillip’s teacher walked into class with a great lesson plan. She brought some plastic pantyhose containers, the ones that look like big eggs. She gave one to each of the kids. They loved it.

Then the teacher told them that they were going to go outside, find something that symbolized the resurrection and put it in their egg. Well the kids took the idea and ran with it, literally. It was wild and crazy for a few minutes, but eventually they all ended up back in the room with the eggs on a table. The teacher began opening them and asking each child to explain the contents.

Inside one was a flower. All the eight year old girls “oohed” and “aahed” when it was opened. The boys weren’t that impressed. Inside another egg was a butterfly. Nobody asked how he did it but one of the boys in the class managed to use his egg like a butterfly net. And this time the boys in the class were very impressed.

Then the teacher opened another egg. It was empty. There was nothing in it! “That’s not fair!” one girl said. “It’s stupid!” a boy added “somebody didn’t do it right!”

Then the teacher felt a tug on her sleeve. She looked and saw Phillip standing next to her. "It's mine," Phillip said. "That's my egg."

The rest of the class started in on him. "You didn't do it right Philip. There's nothing there."

"I did so!" Phillip shouted. "I did so do it right. It's empty because I know the tomb's empty!"

And there was silence for a moment, the kind of silence the Bible talks about it when it says we all need to learn to "be still and know that God is God." And after the silence, things pretty much got back to normal, except that about a year later Phillip died. He contracted an infection that most children could have shrugged off. But Phillip couldn't.

And at his memorial there was a moment in the service when a group of nine year old children walked up with their teacher to front of the sanctuary. They didn't say a word but they each carried a white pantyhose container that looked like a big egg.

When they got to the communion table, they opened them up and laid them on top of the table. There was nothing in the eggs. They were empty. And the children stood there for a moment. They didn't say anything. They didn't need to because the empty eggs said it all

You see the eggs weren't really empty. They were full of living hope, living hope that had been born anew in those children and that teacher when they heard Philip tell them the truth. The eggs weren't empty. The tomb wasn't either. They were both full of the power and promise of God.

And if you are willing to put your faith and trust in the power and the promise of God Easter can become a living hope for you too this morning. Let's pray ...