

April 27, 2008
Easter 6

"Sharing the Reason for Our Hope"

1 PETER 3:15-22

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰ who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-- with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

It has been said that a person can live 30 days without food, 3 days without water, 3 minutes without air, but only 3 seconds without hope. Psychologists did an experiment with rats to show the importance of hope. One group was put into a tank of water to see how long they could swim. Another group was placed into a similar tank but taken out briefly every hour and then put back into the tank. The first group gave up after a couple of hours, where the other group that was periodically taken out of the water was able to stay swimming for almost twenty four hours. One group had hope, the other group lost hope.

Today I am standing in front of a very special group of people whose lives are filled with hope. We live each day with the hope of future glory that Jesus has promised us when he said, "I am going to prepare a place for you." We live with the hope that in every tomorrow we will see and experience more of God's unfailing love and mercy. We live with the hope that our risen and ascended Lord and Savior has the power to take problems in our lives and turn them into blessings.

Have you ever met someone who is not sure of what is waiting for them after they die? Do you know someone who is not certain of how much God loves them and cares for them? Have you been around people who are caught up with the blessings of this life more than the Lord who gives them these blessings? Today God's Word encourages us to be prepared to give an answer, the reason for the hope that is within us. Just think, this could be the week the Lord gives you the opportunity to share this hope with someone who does not have this hope. This could be one of the best weeks of your life.

Opportunities will come

Opportunities will come to us. That is why Peter encourages us to set apart Jesus Christ

as Lord. "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." The word for "set apart" is the same word for making something holy and special. We use this word in the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "Hallowed be thy name." You want to set Jesus apart and give him glory as your Lord and God. When Thomas saw the nail marks in the hands of Jesus he confessed what he believed with all his heart. He said, "My Lord and my God." Everything about your life, your actions, your thoughts, how you interact with people, how you do your work, reflect your firm conviction that Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, is Lord and God. You are willing to die to confess your belief Jesus is Lord, and you are willing to live for this confession.

Peter encourages us to always be prepared. If the conviction is in our hearts, it will result in opportunities to confess with our lips. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The motto of the US Coast Guard is "Semper Paratus" which means "Always Prepared." If a fishing boat overturns in the stormy seas off the coast of Alaska, the Coast Guard is ready to drop people into icy waters to attach a life line to them and pull them into the helicopter. People we interact with every day are perishing without Jesus. Someone needs to bring them the hope of being rescued. God has not chosen angels for this job. He has chosen people like you and me.

When my brother Charlie was about ten years old he went swimming with a cousin at a nearby lake. He had just started swimming so he proudly swam out to the dock at the beach. Just as he was reaching up to pull himself out of the water, a local bully asked, "Do you need help?" and then pushed him under. This happened several times, and finally my poor brother went under for the last time. He heard a splash as he sank to the bottom of the lake. The next thing he saw as the bright sunlight and a lifeguard asking him, "Are you OK?" The lifeguard had done her job, because she was prepared.

Most of us here this morning would not have the skills to rescue people who are caught in a rip tide off Pismo Beach, but all of us are equipped to share the hope that we have in Jesus, the hope of eternal life. You have all the rescue equipment you need with the simple words of Jesus, "God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." You can talk about the problems in our world and the great problem of sin or falling short of God's glory. You can talk about how God gave his Son, how Jesus was born, and how he took our sin upon himself, and what it means that he died and rose for us. You can talk about not perishing in hell forever, but having everlasting life with the Lord. As we sing in the hymn, "If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul, You can tell the love of Jesus. You can say he died for all."

Notice it says that we are to do this with gentleness and respect. "But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ, may be ashamed of their slander." The guidelines for sharing what you believe are very simple. "Speak the truth in love." Talk to people, but don't talk down to them as if you are superior. As Paul told the people of Athens "God is not from each of us." I once saw these words in a church bulletin, "I am a nobody, telling everybody about somebody that can save anybody."

Sometimes we feel like real nobodies. It hardly seems possible that our lives can give a good testimony to what we believe, especially when we are going through hard times and

low moments. Then it is good to remember Job. From the lowest time in his life when he poured out his anger against God and wanted to die, he suddenly speaks the amazing words, "I know that my Redeemer lives." What about the Horation Spafford, the man who wrote the hymn "It is well with my soul" which was just sung by our choir? He lost his business in the Chicago fire, and his children died when a ship in which they were traveling sunk off the coast of England. When the ship he was traveling passed over the spot where many had drowned including his children, he looked up at the stars and thought of the Father's love for him that had not changed. In the dark hour of grief he was able to write of his great hope, "It is well with my soul..." It is in the darkest night that the candle shines brightest. Opportunities will suddenly come to you when you least expect them, whether facing hard times or good times.

Our blessings give us courage

What gives us courage to share the reason for our hope? It is the blessings we have in Christ that fill our lives and lead us to overflow in confessing what we have with others. Listen to how Peter reminds us of how blessed we are and how much we have to offer people. "For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." We may have to suffer for doing good. That suffering does not atone for our sins or make us worthy of God's love. Jesus made us worthy by his death and suffering suffering. He died, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous. Oh, dear friends, don't you love these words. Jesus died once for all. Some people believe that after you die, you need to suffer for you sin in a place called purgatory before the Lord finally takes you to the place he has prepared for you. No, it does not say Jesus suffered once for some or once for a partial payment. It says clearly he suffered once for all.

How do I know this payment is mine? I see my name written next to it because it says, "he died, the righteous for the unrighteous." There is no doubt when we look at how we behaved this past week or some of the words that came from our lips or thoughts in our hearts that we are among those who are called "Unrighteous." That gives us confidence to look at what Jesus did and say that's mine. He died for the unrighteous and that is me!

Jesus was put to death in the body. There is a tremendous interest in being spiritual. The numerous books about being spiritual at Barnes and Noble direct me to look inside of myself for my help. An American Idol contestant speaks about looking inside of himself to find the goodness that can be further developed. What happens when you follow your heart? You reach the conclusion found in Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, who can understand it?" But there is hope and it is not found in you. The hero is not inside of you? The hero is Jesus. His body beaten, bloodied and nailed to the cross is the hope of eternal life. He was put to death in the body.

It also says that Jesus was made alive by the Spirit. Who raised Jesus from the dead? Jesus said the Father would raise him to life and Jesus spoke about raising himself to life. Here it says the Holy Spirit raised Jesus to life. What gave the early Christians such boldness and confidence to witness to Jesus? It was their belief in Jesus bodily resurrection from the dead. Paul was not ashamed to say to the Greeks in Athens, "He has given proof of this to all men by raising Jesus from the dead." Notice how Peter tells us that Jesus even went and preached to the spirits in prison after his resurrection, including the people from Noah's time. Just as Jesus triumphantly proclaimed or preached about his victory to the

spirits in prison, we have the royal privilege of announcing to people that the work Jesus did of rescuing people is complete. The proof of that lies in his resurrection from the dead.

Further confidence to share the reason for our hope lies in the blessing of our baptism. Peter compares the saving waters of the great world flood to the waters of baptism. Noah and his family were saved by the waters that miraculously lifted the ark and allowed it to float. They were saved from a world corrupted by people who had hearts that were evil continually. Just as the waters of the flood saved people, baptism also saves us. It does not remove dirt from our body, but it saves us by connecting us to Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Romans 6 tells us we are buried with Christ by baptism into death, and just as he was raised to life we also get to live a new life. Because of this close connection to Jesus in Baptism we can literally point people to nails marks in his hands and say, "See how much he loves you.

This Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who gave his body for us, the just for unjust, who rose from the dead, who blesses us with baptism, is also ruling and reigning for us. Peter tells us, "He has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand..." This week Jesus is watching over your life, micromanaging every moment, to use you for his glory. He will give you the opportunities to share the reason for your hope, and he will give you the courage to bear witness to what is so real in your life. Amen.