

Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

Sermon for May 5, 2024

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast (Hebrews 6: 19)

About a week ago, I had an experience that I only get once a year, and it's always triggered by something different. This year, I had stepped outside a little after sunrise under a clear sky with a sweet-smelling breeze, birds singing in the trees, robins hopping around the lawn...and I glanced up towards the east at some trees still just in bud so that the branches were also sharply outlined, backlit by the early morning amber rays of the sun...and high up among the slender branches on one of the trees I saw a squirrel leaping from one branch to another. Not running along a branch, but jumping seemingly impossible distances, making breathtaking, death-defying leaps like a fearless little Tarzan through the dizzying heights...and in that moment I had my once a year experience...I was instantly filled with the realization that it's spring again. It's really here; it's really back. The new year has officially begun again.

If you think about it, spring is really the morning of the year. Winter is the night, when we sleep. But spring is the morning, time to get up, have some coffee, time to get moving again. Even the name of the season tells you that. It's spring! Things start springing up. Summer is the long day of the year. Fall is the evening, when things start slowing down. And winter is the night, but that's still a long way in the future. What's here and now is spring!

And spring is the season of optimism, of looking ahead, the season when we plant our gardens and plan our journeys and lay our foundations, when we start translating our visions into reality. In a word, it's the season of faith and hope. We even have a proverb for it: we say, Hope springs eternal.

Our gospel selection for today describes something that happened on a spring evening, long, long ago. Jesus is gathered in an upper room with his small group of disciples, and what he tells them on that occasion essentially defines the hopeful faith that lies at the very foundation of Christianity. So let's read it now together.

John 15: 9-17.

9 "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

11 "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. 12 This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. 17 These things I command you, that you love one another.

Whatever else Christianity is, it is supremely, everlastingly, and confidently optimistic.

Try to imagine the scene. This penniless, itinerant country teacher from Galilee, no place to lay his head, is having supper with a small ragtag group of misfits, and he's telling them that their job will be to go out and save the entire world, from now until eternity.

Imagine what they must have been thinking. The cards are pretty much stacked against us. This is not a good hand we're holding here. This Jesus wants us to dedicate our entire lives to going out into the world and talking to people about him, about who he was and what he did. What are the odds? They must have been

asking themselves, as they looked around at each other. Pretty darn slim, they must have been thinking, in their heart of hearts.

And yet, that's exactly what they did. They stepped out in faith, and changed the world.

Faith in itself, no matter how strong, does not guarantee success. The German people had faith in Hitler, and it led to the defeat and destruction of their nation. What brings success is not the strength of the faith, but its object. And there is only one object of faith that guarantees eternal success. That object is God.

The OT is full of expressions of the faith of the Jewish people in their God. Just read again from our Psalm for this morning:

98:1 O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

98:2 The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

98:3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

98:4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

And that same faith entered into and took control of the hearts of that little group of followers, those whom Jesus chose out of the world and to whom He revealed himself as that very same God, now not some distant invisible presence above the crowds, but then man who had lived and laughed and eaten and slept among them as they journeyed together throughout Galilee and Judea, the same man who was sitting there with them on that spring evening, long, long ago.

The Old Testament events took place in the winter of faith; those of the New Testament in its spring. What was hidden and veiled before Jesus became in Him a living reality. Over and over again during His ministry, Jesus laid claim to be the firm foundation of our faith.

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me, he told them on one occasion. (John 14: 1) Or again, I and the father are one (John 10: 30). Or again, He who has seen Me has seen the Father, (John 14: 9).

Much earlier in his Gospel, John tells of an occasion at a simple, outdoor wedding in Cana, when Jesus turned water into wine, and John concludes the account of this episode by telling us: “(Jesus) thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in Him.”

And now at the end of that ministry, the process is nearly complete, awaiting only the Cross, the resurrection, and the Ascension to solidify the faith that would send this small band of followers out into the world. Was their faith justified? Just look around you, look at human history. Look at the world in which we all grew up. Look at this church.

Luke, in his gospel, reports something else Jesus once said: *...wisdom is justified by all her children.* (Luke 7: 35). We are those children. And as the children of their faith, we are asked to set out each day with the same attitude with which those first followers of Jesus rose with him after supper that spring evening and followed him out into the Garden of Gethsemane. We are asked to lay the foundations for a heavenly Jerusalem. We are asked to begin our journeys towards a better place. We are asked to plant our own seeds of faith in the landscape, in the world, that surrounds each and every one of us, in the full and confident expectation that those seeds of faith will grow, not because of us, but because of Jesus, into a glorious garden of truth, goodness and beauty, into a new Garden of Eden.

And so our prayer for this spring morning, heavenly Father, is that you serenade us from the trees that never die, that you lead us onto paths of righteousness that never end, that you shed the heavenly and eternal warmth of your Beloved Son into our hearts, and we pray for these things in His name.