

HOPE FROM THAT DAWN

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Text: Matthew 26:58

Slowly but surely Jesus' kingdom talk got through to Simon Peter. Rough-type that he was, Simon had grown to appreciate those intangibles Jesus was attempting to convey—faith, hope, and love.

But after the triumphant entry, things had begun to slip.

The Master's opponents closed ranks against Him!

Of course, Jesus, for His part, "ruffled a few feathers" by throwing the money-changers out of the temple and cursing a fig tree.

After that memorable Thursday supper, Simon Peter had tried in the garden of Gethsemane to help his Master's cause by the quick use of his sword, but all he got for his trouble was a reprimand.

Then came in swift succession the traitor's kiss by Judas Iscariot, instant arrest, and the trial before Caiaphas.

Now "the Big Fisherman" saw "the handwriting on the wall," and the Bible tells us that "Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end."

Millions in our world today sit where Simon Peter sat that night—"to see the end."

Disillusionment blankets so many hearts!

The feeling persists that some grim inevitability is moving in upon us, that it's just a matter of time, so we sit down in the dark to watch the end.

I suppose that sitting is the appropriate posture, for we so often feel that there is nothing more that we can do.

Inexorably, we sit to watch the end: the end of law and order; the end of credibility in government; the end of the family as we have known it; the end of religion; the end of the church.

Yes, even the end of God!

This is part of the reason why a new isolationism is building in the country. There is a decided retreat from commitment and a feeling of "What's the use?"

I wonder if many young people in the so-called "Jesus Movement" were not just burned out activists who found that they could not change the world during a summer vacation.

They then retreated into the womb of a rather isolated piety that keeps asking, "What difference does anyone's efforts make anyway?"

Sometimes I feel that trying to help history along or change society is about as futile as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic!

Also, a fresh wave of hedonism is among us. It says, "Let's enjoy the pleasures of the moment, for there is no tomorrow." As the gospel according to Schlitz puts it, "Grab all the 'gusto' you can because you only go around once."

So we live in an endless ambience of pleasure and boredom. Maybe we believe that if we plunge into enough enjoyable activities, what is wrong out there will somehow go away.

But life is for real, and most of us just have to rough it out—glad for the routine that keeps us occupied!

We try, with a straight face, to make ultimate concerns out of attempts to curb inflation, the latest public scandal, the upcoming elections, our next vacation, or some hoped-for raise.

We are even willing to allow ourselves to become absorbed in the would-be-problems pushed by Madison Avenue—"ring around the collar," deodorants that lose their power after five o'clock, and the single razor blade that doesn't catch quite all the whiskers the first time by.

Listen: the truth that you and I and our world need to hear today is that when our lives are void of the transcendent, they sink into the absurd.

"Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end."

We all know that Simon Peter went on to deny his Lord, which is another way of saying that he would renounce his vision and walk away from it all!

But the good news of the Gospel is that Simon Peter left too soon. He left before the dawn! The world was not coming to a stop—as he thought—it was coming to a start!

Almighty God reversed the sentence of death that sinful man had imposed on Jesus. The angel of the Lord said, "He is risen; He is not here: Behold, the place where they laid Him."

Indeed, when the dawn came, those who had journeyed to Joseph of Arimathea's garden prepared to mourn, left to rejoice.

They had come walking, but they left running!

Death had done its worst, and its worst was not enough. The eternal God had now pronounced His divine "well done" on all that Jesus Christ had come to do and say and be.

The kingdom of God had a future after all!

You see, the Bible tells us most assuredly that God's purposes for us will ultimately prevail; that service will triumph over exploitation; that generosity will pre-empt greed; that freedom will overcome bondage; that grace will reign over sin; and that love will be victorious over hate.

To be a Christian today is to believe that this is so!

Against Dachau and Hiroshima, against Belfast and Bangladesh, against Vietnam and South Africa, against assassinations in Dallas and Memphis; yes, and against the petty hatreds and antagonisms of your heart and mine, God sets the resurrection of His Son and invites our trust and hope.

We simply are to keep busy at our heavenly Father's business here on earth.

One day turned it all around for Simon Peter! He realized that there was a dawn, that there was hope, that Jesus Christ's kingdom would be a reality after all.

So, well may the trumpets sound! Well may our hearts be glad! God has won!

Now as I look at this vast throng, I am reminded that paramount matters often have strange and seemingly small beginnings.

Christopher Columbus' first voyage to America cost less than ten thousand dollars; currently large ocean liners have a single stateroom priced above that figure.

The airplane made by the Wright brothers was built out of spare bicycle parts, had a top speed of less than seven miles an hour, and flew only one hundred and twenty feet. Today's 747 Jet will get you from Dallas to the nation's capitol in two hours, carrying 358 passengers at an altitude of about 40,000 feet with a speed of better than 600 miles an hour.

Who would have imagined that the organization initiated in the First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia, in May of 1845 would become the largest Protestant denomination in America?

Who could have imagined that those initial 327 Baptists from eleven states would multiply to a throng like this—representing fifty states and over 12,000,000 members with more than one billion dollars in total gifts!

Nevertheless, these days it is fashionable to be impatient with anything institutional or organized. Certainly, a favorite pastime of the radical theologians and sundry other ecclesiastical morticians is that of belittling the church, and pronouncing with monumental dogmatism that the days of Christianity are numbered, that we should just sit down and watch the end.

There is nothing new about this. Impatience with the church is as old as the church herself. The church must always stand under the judgment of God and before the criticism of men. She must be continually renewed, but, I say that the posture of protest should never be adopted without the corresponding stance of love.

The poet, Robert Frost, wanted this on his gravestone: "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." Frost rebuked and criticized the world out of his tremendous love for it and his longings to see its rich possibilities fulfilled.

This morning, as I am attempting to speak positively for the Christian faith, I ask, "Shouldn't we have a lover's quarrel with the church?"

Of course, there is always a gulf between the actual and the ideal.

As one wise old believer once advised younger Christians, "We should leave the perfect parish where it belongs—in the world of fantasy."

The most foolish of all myths is the myth of perfectionism in anything on this earth. We ruin our chances of both happiness and usefulness by expecting too much from our institutions and relationships.

We just plain expect the impossible of our families, our government, our military, our churches.

We overlook the fact that almighty God builds the church out of struggling, weak, unlovely people.

Jurgen Moltmann's book, *The Theology of Hope*, has sharply answered the nihilism of Europe following two world wars and certainly enthralled American theological circles. Moltmann convincingly brings us back to the hope that we believers must offer this age!

In a Singapore prison following the outbreak of World War II, there was a prisoner whose best friend had been sentenced by the Japanese to solitary confinement. He kept wondering what he could do to help his friend. The obvious answer was, "Nothing." His friend was locked up in a tiny cell in a section of the prison which was so heavily guarded that no one could get in without permission.

Then one day a fellow prisoner saw this man trying to cut another prisoner's hair. "Hello, John. I never knew you could cut hair!" "I can't," replied John. "It is something I've never done before. I'm just learning." "Why?" "Well, as you know, my friend is in solitary. He is allowed to have his hair cut once a month. So I thought I'd apply for the job."

Sometime later all the prisoners heard that John had been appointed as barber for those in solitary. Then many asked him, "How are things working out now that you see your friend, Jim, every month?" John's answer was, "Oh, I'd say fair. I can't take him anything and I can't speak to him." "Well, then what can you do?" "Well, while I'm snipping away at his hair, I can keep saying to him, 'Please keep your chin up, keep your chin up.' The guards think this has something to do with barbering—a shibboleth of the trade. So I just keep saying 'Chin up! Chin up!'"

That is what we believers, set down in a sinful world in 1974, must constantly proclaim to our day, "Chin up. There is hope! Jesus Christ offers the way out of our maze of dreary, sinful days—the way of pardon and reconciliation."

We ought to be aware that what ails our society will not be overcome without organized effort and that unorganized Christians are no match for organized evil.

Nevertheless, the tension between aversion to organization and awareness of need for organization gives most of us fits, does it not?

I would remind you that in the New Testament there is no such thing as a Christian-at-large or Christians in isolation. Jesus' deliberate strategy was to choose twelve disciples and send them out. Subsequently, Dr. Luke tells us, "... The Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two. ..."

The first item on the docket of the infant church was an administrative item: to secure a successor to Judas Iscariot.

Indeed, the Scriptures are never afraid of organization. Granted, the primary focus of the mission of the church is not the buildings where we meet and worship. Nor is the kingdom of God a repair job for shattered nerves. The primary focus of the church is out there where we live, where we have our social life, where we gather with friends and family, where we labor for our daily bread.

This is precisely where the kingdom of God is to be discerned—the sacred and the secular all mixed up together in contemporary society and out of it something new—the dawn of hope.

The truth is, it is an exciting time to be alive if you have genuine hope. However, you cannot get at it by simply patching up liturgies with guitars, or by new ways of arranging the ordained ministries, or by tinkering with old structures and existing functions—as necessary as all that may be at times.

It is evident enough that our churches have often been manipulative in evangelism, at times ignoring minorities and trapped in culture, and even sometimes taking a "flatearth" stance on the Bible, and we know all about "the sweet bye and bye" but little about the here and now.

There is presently a new breed of well-paid executives in the offices of many major industries throughout our nation whose job it is to determine what business a company is in. On the face of it, this seems to require no analysis or investigation. Certainly General Motors, DuPont, Westinghouse, and IBM know what their business is. No! This is not the case, these executives maintain.

They point out that one of the biggest businesses in America once was the buggy business. Yet, when the automobile era was ushered in, the buggy business was ushered out. Why? Because the people who made buggies were in the buggy business-period! They did not see themselves as being in the transportation business. Had they known they were in the transportation business, they would still be in business today—as builders of automobiles and ships, planes and missiles.

Any any Christian group that gets so involved in what it is

doing without knowing what it is, is simply beating the drums for its own funeral.

For one to say or believe that he or she is a wife, a father, an accountant, a secretary, a serviceman, a professor, is to mistake identity for essence. It is to mistake what one does for what one is. Consequently, you never really know who you are or what your real mission is. Of course, our mission as Christians is to offer this world fellowship with almighty God through Jesus Christ.

In our era of disillusionment, I submit that many believers have about given up on ever finding purpose and happiness. They just sit with Simon Peter "to see the end." They are so filled with boredom and pessimism these days that it is difficult, if not impossible, to convince them that abundant and eternal life can be a present reality.

My friends, happiness is inseparably related to Christian hope. Without valid hope there can be no real happiness. Complete happiness is found through Jesus Christ! It is always the by-product of His presence and our subsequent service, and therefore happiness is a present possibility for everyone listening to me.

I am not talking about some rose-colored view of things, like whistling in the dark to keep up courage. That is not the answer!

The solution is found in the Bible, in Christian hope, in a resurrected Saviour, in a new quality of living.

In truth, all religion is another form of hope. It is like John Bunyan's descriptive phrase, "yonder shining light."

Today the most important and insistent movement in Christian circles on both sides of the Atlantic is called "the theology of hope." This theology is rooted in the nature of our Biblical faith. Proper Christian evangelism is impossible without it. Likewise, the ability to hope bestows energy for Christian social action—keeping it from becoming just a movement of desperation.

I wish I could shout it for the whole world to hear: "A theology of hope takes evil seriously by confronting it with the redemptive power of the living Christ, which can more than match the most insidious wickedness!"

You see, your hope is what makes you tick. Hope gives meaning to life, and Christian hope looks beyond momentary suffering and defeat to final victory assured for us in Jesus Christ!

In James Russell Lowell's poem, "Columbus," the poet is feeling his way into what it must have been like to have had

Christopher Columbus' vision and have faced the obstacles, first on land and then on sea, that the explorer had to endure. Toward the end of the poem the crew puts the pressure on Columbus to turn back. All those days at sea and no sign of land! Food and water supply diminishing, they beg him, almost to the point of mutiny, to turn around.

But Columbus asks for one more day, one more dawn! He cries out:

"O God, this world, so crammed with eager life . . .
let me not in their dull ooze be stranded;

.....
One poor day!

Remember whose and now how short it is!

It is God's day, it is Columbus's.

A lavish day! One day, with life and heart,
is more than time enough to find a world."

We Southern Baptists have one day, our day, to find and win a world for Jesus Christ. We can sit down like Simon Peter and await the end, or we can attempt to conquer it now.

In 1924, George Mallory and a party of Englishmen attempted to scale Mount Everest. After enduring unbelievable hardships, they camped 25,000 feet up.

From this point two of them set out for the summit, but their heroic attempt failed. Today, Mallory, and his companion lie buried under the snows of that Himalayan peak. Their friends returned to England to tell their story.

One of them addressed a large London audience. He stood before a screen on which was shown an enlarged photograph of Mount Everest. After he had described the difficulties and tragedies of their expedition, the man turned and seemed to address the picture of the mountain.

"Everest," he said, "we tried to conquer you once, but you overpowered us. We tried to conquer you a second time and again you were too much for us. But Everest, I want you to know that we are going to conquer you."

In this Southern Baptist Convention of 1974, I would like to think that with authentic Christian hope we who are gathered here would say something like that to our world: "We have tried for 2000 years to bring you to 'the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ.' We have tried again, and you can be sure of it: we will keep trying."

"We will not sit down 'to see the end,' rather with authentic Christian hope we will rise up to face the dawn with our victorious Lord."