

Why Should I Go On?

Luke 24:1-12, 2 Peter 1:12-19

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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Lenten Series #7: Is there any hope?

Pastor Dave Carver

I had breakfast a couple of weeks ago with Bill Carl, who is the new President of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He told a story, worth repeating, about a friend of his. It seems as though this friend had an ancient relative – an uncle, I think it was – who, no matter who asked him and when they asked him, “How are you?”, the old man would always reply, “Well, I’m happy to be alive. I’m happy to be alive.” Bill was intrigued by this, and one day asked the old man why he always responded like that. The man smiled, and told his story:

Years and years ago, when I was just a young man, we all lived on the farm out in Texas. We had a few animals, and a really old, really cantankerous tractor. Sometimes you had to get out in front of the tractor and jiggle some of the connections in order to get it started up. Well, one day I was working on that tractor and I couldn’t get it to start for nothing. Finally, though, the engine roared to life and it started up – without a driver. Right away that tractor ran over me and broke my leg. In a second, it had run over my dog and over the horse, too, before it stopped by running into the barn. After a while, the pain got so bad I just sort of lay there. And I saw my father walk over to the horse and sort of kick the horse a bit. The horse whinnied, but it was clear that there was at least two broken legs. So my father shot the horse. He moved over to the dog, and nudged it a bit. Nothing happened, and my father shot the dog. When he got to me and I saw him and that gun, I sat bolt upright and said, “I’m happy to be alive! I am happy to be alive!”

That reminds me of one woman I know who, no matter when I telephone or visit, when I ask, “Hey, how are you?” she always, always, ALWAYS says, “I’m livin’.” That’s it. She’s “livin’”. As though she can in some way picture a reality where I might ask her that question and she would NOT be livin’.

When I heard the story of the old man who is so “happy to be alive”, even in the face of his own pain, and when I thought about my friend who’s just “livin’”, I remembered the recent series of deaths attributed to the so-called “choking game” here in Pittsburgh – a game in which people are so bored with their circumstances that they intentionally deprive themselves of oxygen for the sake of the rush that they feel when the flow of oxygen resumes. It’s like that old joke where the first man is beating his head against a wall repeatedly and a colleague asks him why he’s doing it, and he says, “because it feels so good when I stop!”

In some demographic groups in our country, suicide is the second leading cause of death.

Are we “happy to be alive?” Are we “livin’”? Or are we looking for a way out altogether? Three perspectives.

The Apostle Peter was happy to be alive. That’s an interesting perspective for him, given his situation. At the time when 2 Peter was written, he was either on death row or already dead (there are a number of Biblical Scholars who suggest that the letter that bears his name was actually written by some of his friends after his death). He was not in a good place: he was languishing in a Roman prison where, as a non-citizen of the Empire, he subsisted on meager rations, was unable to practice his faith, suffered abuse, and could look forward to a cruel death. But he’s happy to be alive....why?

Must be because he's looking back on a life that's been lived exactly how he'd wished it to be...But no, that's not the case. You remember Peter. He's the one who denied Jesus. Three times. Who fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane. Who was publicly reprimanded by the Apostle Paul in the church in Antioch. He had been beaten, imprisoned, abused...he had been "run over", but he was "happy to be alive!"

A few weeks ago, I shared portions of a novel with you. The book is called *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* and it's supposed to be a glimpse inside current American culture. Early in the novel, we hear this conversation:

"You know all of this sex gossip and end-of-the-world nonsense, I wonder if they're really only confessing something else to each other."

"Like?"

"Like how scared sick they all are. I mean, when people start talking seriously about hoarding cases of Beef-a-Roni in the garage and get all misty-eyed about the Last Days, then it's about as striking a confession as you're ever likely to get of how upset they are that life isn't working out the way they thought it would."<sup>1</sup>

"Life isn't working out the way they thought it would." Do you know that feeling? Have you been there? Do you know what it's like to be run over, but not dead?

Peter knew about that. He had been there, and we've seen it this week. Thursday night he was sure that Jesus was the king of the world, and he was going to be his right-hand-man. Then the unthinkable happened and in the space of a few hours, he was crying by the fire. But then it happened.

"But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen clothes by themselves; then he went home, wondering at what had happened." (Luke 24:12)

Before the women came with a crazy story from the grave, Peter knew it was pretty much all up to him. If there was going to be meaning and purpose in life, then he was going to have to create it for himself. But if Jesus was in fact resurrected from the dead, then he was a part of something bigger than himself. He was a part of a story that fit together and that could give his life meaning. Peter was, as he said in the second reading for today, "an eyewitness to his majesty."

For the last seven weeks, we've been looking at some of the huge questions of life. Questions that according to some scholars<sup>2</sup>, every society has to answer for its members if they are to be able to live without falling apart. Who am I? Do things fit together? Who can I trust? What are the values by which I live? How can I protect myself? What is the purpose of my life? If we know the answers to these questions, we are able to find meaning and purpose. If not, we wander through life wondering what it's all about.

You know what it's like to have been run over. You've broken your leg, lost your job, buried your spouse, broken up with your girlfriend...You've been run over. Are you happy to be alive?

There are some who seem to teach, especially on a day like today, that the job of the church is to keep people from being run over. That if you are really connected with Jesus, if you have enough faith, if you are truly a Christian, then the bad stuff won't happen in your life.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time* (Eerdmans 1999), p. 22.

Listen: if you ever hear me, or anyone else, preach a gospel like that, run away as fast as you can. If anyone preaches that the Gospel is here to protect us from being run over, then that one is a liar.

Why are we here? Because, like Peter, we are “eyewitnesses to his majesty.” The English translation of 2 Peter 1:16 says “we had been” or “we were” eyewitnesses, but a literal translation of the original language reads, “but having become eyewitnesses...” In other words, the power and majesty of Christ is something to which we can all become witnesses. Have you seen it?

Maybe you saw that power when a marriage, pressed to the breaking point, was revived by forgiveness, honesty, hope, and hard work.

Perhaps you caught a glimpse of resurrection power when you watched a young mother defeat an addiction, get her education, and provide for her family.

I know I was an eyewitness to the presence of the Risen Christ when a young friend of mine who had been scared out of his wits to die was able to embrace the hope offered to him in Jesus Christ; to share communion with his family, and to die in peace and confidence knowing, like Peter, that after this life ends there is something better in store.

This church is full of people who have been run over, but who are happy to be alive. Because we have become eyewitnesses to the power of resurrection. Because when Jesus burst forth from the tomb, it was just the first step in his overcoming all the power of brokenness and sin and death.

But I’m not willing to pretend this morning that everyone who is here is just swimming in hope and alive in the knowledge of that resurrection. I’m sure that there are those among us who have not yet had the “aha!” moment that Peter had when he walked into the tomb and he saw the empty graveclothes. If you are not someone who has witnessed the majestic power and presence of the Risen Lord, then I’ve got something really simple for you to do: come back next week. Get connected. Because the church is where we see the power exploding in unusual and unexpected places.

Shane Claiborne is a young preacher from Philadelphia who remembers the story of the time his grandfather and his uncle were out baling hay. They loaded the truck up so high that the hay pressed down against the tires of the truck, which wasn’t really so much of a problem until they pulled out of the field and onto the highway. The friction ignited one bale of hay, and then before too long much of the back of the truck was ablaze – only grandpa didn’t know it. Here he is, driving a torch down the highway, wondering why in the world people are all waving at him. Finally, he sees what is happening and the first thing that he does is stop the truck, which is a bad idea, because now the flames are not pressed back by the power of the draft and the cab of the truck begins to melt. So Grandpa starts to drive again, only this time he’s weaving and turning sharply, yanking the wheel and lurching from side to side. Balls of fire are falling off the truck into...other hayfields. Shane’s grandfather says that one of the funniest things he’s ever seen is the fire trucks chasing through the county, some of them stopping to put out the brush fires, others racing to catch the truck, seeking to quench the blaze.

That’s kind of what it’s like – or ought to be like – here. Peter says we are to be as attentive to this as to a lamp burning in a dark place...and this is the truth, beloved: we are called to share this fire that burns within us. We are called to weave our way across this neighborhood, across this city, across this county spreading the holy flame of God’s love, sharing the light of the world, powered by the hope that we have that this life is not all there is.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Shane Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution* (Zondervan, 2006), p. 350 ff.)

I've been run over – but I'm not merely "livin'". I'm glad to be alive. Because I know that I'm a child of God. That I am a part of the story that God is writing in the world. I can trust Jesus, and in his strength, I can trust others with who I am. I do not need to protect myself in this world, because I am immortal until God is finished with me. Since I am held in God's hand, I am free – indeed, compelled – to do God's work. And when things seem toughest, I can go to bed knowing that it's not all up to me, and there is hope. Because the tomb is empty. He is risen! He is risen indeed. Amen. Alleluia.