

“Let’s Celebrate Resurrection Today!”
John 20:1-18
(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+20:1-18)

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Easter hope is not escapism; it is the certain knowledge that something better is coming.

This past week, we all hoped that the Michigan State Spartans would win the NCAA Basketball championship. They didn't.

Several years ago we hoped that our investments would do well enough to sustain dreams of early retirement. They didn't.

I occasionally hope that creative types will use their talents to produce the kind of art, music, television and movies that uplift all of our spirits and inspire us to try to be better than we are. They haven't yet.

Five years ago when I found out my prostate was enlarged I hoped it wasn't cancer, I hoped that I would not have to undergo surgery. It was and I did.

When you feel like the patron saint of lost causes, the Rodney Dangerfield of the world, it is easy to ask whether God has abandoned you, or whether God is there at all. The followers of Jesus were hidden away in the upper room before Easter Sunday. The disciples sent the women to the tomb thinking that they were probably less likely to be arrested. They were all in danger of giving up their faith because of the hostility and persecution they had just witnessed at the hands of the Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire. What could they do? What would we do if we were in their place?

You have three choices when faced with difficult political, economic, or personal times. You can think and think and think, but there are simply no other choices, only variations and combinations of these three:

Choice #1: You can abandon all hope.

Choice #2: You can deny and pretend things aren't that bad.

Choice #3: You can believe that God is in the world as light and goodness.

Let's take a closer look at these.

The first choice, abandoning all hope, leads to bitterness or insanity.

Let's admit it, during the past 7 months of unremitting negative news, falling stock prices, homes and business bankruptcies, and loss of jobs, it is easy to abandon hope. There are people who have turned on to drugs and opted out of reality. There are people who have turned to suicide and dropped out of life. If we really took to heart the enormous suffering of the world, and we saw no way out; no final justice or redemption, we would either become embittered in our despair, or we would crack under the strain and become hopeless cynics lost in insanity. Abandoning hope is not a good choice.

The second option of pretending is a much more common choice

Pretending things aren't that bad becomes either naïve optimism or willful attempts to remain blind to ours or to other people's suffering.

Some naïvely optimistic pretenders are optimistic for themselves, as they believe the bad stuff only happens to other people who somehow deserve it - the "you-smoked-for-30-years-so-you-deserve-your-cancer" school of thought. These are very unpleasant people to be around when you're suffering, and they

don't tend to do too well when suffering finally catches up to them, either. They get stuck on the question: "Why did this happen to me?"

Other naïvely optimistic pretenders are optimistic for the sum total of humanity, believing that we can create our own paradise on earth if we just work at it together. But even if this was possible - and every bit of evidence in the history of humanity says it isn't - this future paradise wouldn't undo all of the pain and suffering and crushed hope of the past.

On the other hand, there are blind pretenders who simply try to ignore pain as much as possible, usually by running away - making a break for it, an escape attempt - from suffering. White flight from the inner city to the suburbs; lying in the sun in Cancun; getting hammered on booze; sniffing cocaine are all escapist traps. Many people think they can live their lives in escapist dreams, but life will catch up with everyone of us at some time or the other.

Escapism and denial by any measure are not good choices when facing difficult times. May I remind you what part of the anatomy of an ostrich is prominent when the bird places its head in the sand!

The third choice is the Easter choice.

John's Gospel is written about despairing Jesus followers 2,000 years ago. Jesus was dead. The tomb had received his remains. The women were going to anoint the body. Then, God acted! God reminded them that their real hope lies in God's saving action in the midst of this dark and painful world. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God is present in this world and each follower of Jesus has an inheritance with God that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading.

For us, in the beginning of the 21st Century, the Easter choice is burdened with its own problems. These days, when followers of Jesus speak to people whose lives are crushed and offer hope of a heavenly calling, they're often accused of being pie-in-the-sky idealists. Christians with hope hear things like, "That's all well and good, but it doesn't really put food on the table, or pay the rent, or cure my cancer, does it?"

Let us honestly ask, did the empty tomb of Jesus Christ lead his followers to be activists or an escapists?

The snapshot we have of all the disciples prior to Christ's resurrection is of fearful people who essentially ran away - the consummate escapists. I invite you to remember that Peter was the brash apostle who swore he would never betray Christ, denied him three times before the rooster crowed, then ran away. However after Peter's visit to the empty tomb and his later encounter with the Risen Jesus, we see one of the early Church's fearless leaders at work. Peter was an activist: a man who faced his own martyrdom with the guts to ask to be crucified upside down because he wasn't worthy to die the same way Jesus died.

The fact that John possibly wrote today's passage during a time of martyrdom of the church suggests that we have here a confession of ultimate hope at a time the Roman state was bent on crushing all Jesus followers.

As beloved followers of Jesus Christ we do not have to find ways to escape suffering in this world, we can embrace suffering as Christ did on the cross because we know that the suffering is not the end of the matter.

Christian Hope is based on the fact that there is something better coming.

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer, and had been given three months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die, so she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what Scriptures she would like read and what she wanted to be wearing. The woman also told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order, and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That shocks you, doesn't it?" the woman asked.

"Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork, I knew that something great was about to be given to me. It wasn't Jell-O or pudding. It was cake or pie. It will be something with substance.

So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: 'Something better is coming, so keep your fork, too.'" The pastor's eyes were filled with tears as he hugged the woman goodbye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he also knew that that woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She knew that something better was coming.

At the funeral, people were walking by the woman's casket, and they saw the pretty dress she was wearing and her favorite Bible and the fork placed in her right hand. Over and over, the pastor heard the question, "What's with the fork?" And over and over, he smiled. During his message, the pastor told the people of the conversation he had with the woman shortly before she died. He also told them about the fork and about what it symbolized to her. The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork, and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it, either. He was right. So the next time you reach down for your fork, let it remind you that there is something better coming.

This season of Easter is a special time for Christians to celebrate the ultimate reason for our hope:

Christ was raised from the grave! During this Easter, Christ invites us to rise with him to new life. Jesus Christ invites you to God's family table and there is no request to leave the table. Rather Jesus suggests to each one of you to keep your forks because something great is still coming for you!

Easter is an invitation in the name and power of Jesus to break that habit or addiction you had given up all hope of ever breaking. There's something better coming; "Keep your forks."

Easter is an invitation in the name and power of Jesus Christ to work at renewing the marriage you had given up all hope of ever saving. There's something better coming; "Keep your forks."

Easter is an opportunity to reach out to your neighbors who, in the busyness of your lives, you neglect. There's something better coming; "Keep your forks."

Easter is an invitation to look at your lack of love and seek God's heart so that you can grow in compassion for all people, especially those near and dear to you. There's something better coming; "Keep your forks."

Easter is a chance for all no-hopers to regain their vision of what can be! There's something better coming; "Keep your forks."

Easter is an opportunity to renew your faith in Jesus Christ as your Teacher, Guide, Savior and Lord. There's something better coming; "Keep your forks."

Easter is a chance to "renew our strength and mount up with wings as eagles; to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint." There's something better coming; "Keep your forks."

Easter is the opportunity to celebrate hope in the face of hopelessness, power in the face of powerlessness, and victory snatched from the jaws of death!

Easter is a celebration of resurrection each day, redemption each day, reconciliation each day, and restoration of relationship with God each and every day!

Celebrate!