

Living Into Hope (Easter Sunday)

Matthew 28:1-10 1Peter 1:3-7

1 Peter 1:3-7

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

This is the word of the Lord.

About 20 years ago, on a warm summer day while I was on vacation, and while our kids were on summer break, just on a whim I said to our son Ben, “Let’s go camping at Mt. St. Helens.” He said “Sure.” And since that camping trip, I or our family have been back to Mt. St. Helens a few times over the years. Before I get to that, let’s go back to May 18, 1980. Most of us who lived here at that time remember where we were and what we were doing on May 18, 1980.

Before that day, Mt. St. Helens looked like this:



My best friend in Jr. High school's family took me camping on Spirit Lake in 1978, and that's what it looked like. Then, in the days after May 18 it looked like this:



And then, in the aftermath, after the side of the mountain was literally blown off, and following a slide of boiling mud and ash and water and rock, it looked like this:



The trees were flattened and lined up like toothpicks; there was kind of an odd beauty to it.

Fast forward about 35 years to my first camping trip there with Ben and what we discovered that day as we walked and hiked around, was that this had happened:



Wildflowers and little bunches of grass had sprung up everywhere; no one scattered seeds or planted them; they just sprung up out of the ash and rocks). And we saw not only wildflowers, but this:



Look what's coming up underneath the dead trees: new fir and spruce trees had begun to grow; the mountain and foothills were re-foresting, all by themselves; again, no one planted these trees; they just sprung up out of the devastation. The mountain was becoming reforested! And, wildlife began to return, and we were told by a national park guy that even Spirit Lake had fish in it again!

Now, fast forward about a few years, when our whole family took a trip to Mt. St. Helens to hike up to the crater rim on a beautiful August day. They only allow 100 people on the mountain per day, so we got our permit and ascended it. And what we discovered, again, is this:



A nice panoramic view, but look in the foreground at the wildflowers and grasses.

And this:



The dreaded boulder field, that you have climb over before you ascend the ash field; again, shrubs and wildflowers are growing from the crevasses in the rocks.

And this:



Another plant practically bursting out from between the rocks.

And this:



These are wild native lilies—fitting for Easter, and symbolic of resurrection—growing right out of the molten rock).

We reached the summit (well, the crater rim) and there was much rejoicing! Here we are:



And then came a surprise. After schlogging up a steep incline for one mile through an ash field to get to the crater rim, when we sat down to eat our lunch, our daughter Hannah had this little visitor:



I don't know what a grasshopper was doing on top of the mountain, because we didn't see any grass all the way up there, but there must have been some food supply other than the assorted morsels that fell from our lunch. Yet here was a sign of life!).



Wildflowers everywhere!

What was already a fantastic day on Mt. St. Helens of hiking and being together as a family and experiencing sheer beauty in all directions, also became a living parable of life after death, of the emergence of beauty after devastation. It reminds me of that wonderful promise given in Isaiah 61:

God will give us “beauty instead of ashes(!), the oil of joy instead of mourning, a garment of hope and praise instead of a spirit of despair.”

Now, Mt. St. Helens isn't the only volcano to have erupted in the history of the world, or even in our lifetime. All over the world we see dormant volcanoes that have been reforested, and with plant life and other wildlife having returned. However, what an amazing gift to us, who live in this part of the world, to have witnessed an active volcano blow its top, then watch it begin to regenerate right before our very eyes. Only three and half hours away.

And I marvel at the fact that God has built renewal and regeneration into the very fabric of the earth. That somehow, the earth and the ecosystem have their own intelligence, a built-in way, to use an Easter term, of resurrecting.

The apostle Peter exclaims, "Praise God! God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." I'd like us to reflect on hope today. And tomorrow. And the next day, and the day after that.

And not just hope, but, as Peter puts it, a *living* hope. That seems like an odd combination of words, doesn't it? Is there any other kind of hope but living? What other kinds of hope are there? Hope, by nature, has a pulse. I think what Peter means here by attaching the word "living" to "hope" is to point to Jesus Christ, who is alive. To a *person* who is alive, who is himself our hope. This isn't an intellectual hope; it isn't an illustration, or a nice springtime metaphor. But a living, breathing, resurrected person.

I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I know that seems like a big leap to believe it, but years ago it was settled for me when I began to learn about how many of the early Christians, including several of the first followers like Peter, were martyred for their faith. For simply believing in the resurrection of Jesus. They weren't killed because they were criminals or because they were doing harm. But simply because they were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus, and it began to make a difference for them, and countless others. And, somehow, the authorities-that-be felt like those people were a threat.

People might be willing to die for many things, but not for a story that *they know they made up*. People don't die for a metaphor. Not to mention that in all of the gospel accounts, none of the people in there actually believe it at first. They all struggled, they were afraid (as we heard), or they sounded like knuckleheads. No one wrote themselves into the story as a hero. So this isn't propaganda, I concluded, and I became convinced that it must be true. It didn't make sense to me to believe otherwise.

So we have hope. A *living* hope. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Life being called forth out of rock, rubble and ash. Think of some of the volcanic eruptions of your life, or the life of someone you know. It often can look hopeless—like things just can't get better or come back to life. You, or someone you know feels buried underneath the ash heap of a serious illness, or the death of a loved

one. Under the ash heap of a relationship breakup or a conflict; under the rubble of a job loss. Our political and societal climate in the United States right now feels like an ongoing volcanic eruption of crisis, calamity and confusion, doesn't it?

The resurrection says there is always hope. Living hope. The good news is that God always brings life back from death or destruction, joy from despair, new beginnings from old endings. That's the good news.

The *hard* news that comes with the good news is that renewal takes time. Volcanic destruction doesn't become flowers and forests overnight. The seeds of new life go dormant for a while. They're there, but hidden, unseen, for a time ("something God alone can see" as we just sang). And this is why hope is hope, because we hang in there, in spite of what circumstances are, or what things look like at the moment. We are required to trust, and to wait. The apostle Paul puts it this way (Romans 8): he, like Peter, talks about the difficulties and trials we face; he even calls them sufferings, like labor pains, and then he says this: "In hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." Dang it. That's the hard part.

But it can be a joyful part, because God often does his best work when you don't think he's doing anything at all. The greatest lessons of faith are often learned

in the dark, and through difficulty. The seeds of new life are being germinated underground, even when we can't see them. And that's when we have to trust, to wait, when we don't know what's going on, or aren't aware of what God is up to. Yet, God is always up to something good. That's our hope.

Even if we may not be experiencing new life right now the way we want or need to experience it, and we're waiting for it—perhaps we feel buried under ash and rubble of a volcanic eruption of some kind—or even if life is great; no volcanoes for me at the moment!—we can keep ourselves encouraged and hopeful, by doing at least 2 important things (here is my charge to us this Easter season):

First, keep our eyes and ears open for signs of new life around us: in creation, in others' lives, even in national and world affairs. They're there! All around us! Our minds are so trained to look for what's wrong, or trained to not believe good news that we can lose our ability to see what's right and good and true, and let it encourage us and give us hope. It takes some effort these days to look for signs of new life and living hope, but they can be found. We just have to put on our glasses of hope so we can see them, and re-train ourselves to look for them.

If you need a dose of good news, there are lots of web sites now, dedicated to telling good news stories, hopeful stories. Just type "good news" into your

search engine and you'll get dozens of options for places to read about all of the good things that are happening in our world.

Now, these are stories you can read or hear about in various media, but don't just look online. Look around you, in your neighborhood and your workplace, your school, and in your friendships. If you go sleuthing around your communities, you'll find signs of new life and hope all around you, on a smaller scale, and on a personal scale, on a daily basis. We need to see and hear and appreciate these so we can stay encouraged, and stay hopeful.

A second important thing we need to do is, we all need to find community—or communities of hope. We need to find and be nourished by community.

Several years ago, I read an excellent book titled *Refugia Faith* by Debra Rienstra. *Refugia* is a biological/ecological term that describes an area in which pockets of seeds and other organisms survive through a period of unfavorable conditions, like volcanic eruptions, or forest fires, or floods. Pockets of refugia exist while the mud slide goes over it, or the fire, or the ash. These little communities of seeds and other organisms keep life going, for as long as necessary, until the devastation passes, and the conditions become favorable for them to spring forth again. And Debra Rienstra writes that this is exactly what *people* need to do right now, and are in fact already doing, during this volcanic eruption of a time that we

are living in. We need to create pockets of refugia, communities that are not only safe places, but places where hope is kept alive, where we protect and nurture a few good things together, where we engage in practices that sustain us, and where we generate plans and ideas for a bright future, and let what is good and beautiful begin to grow and connect and spread.

Trees in particular do this thing called “advance regeneration.” Advance regeneration describes how trees prepare for the future by sprouting dozens and dozens of seedlings on the forest floor even when they aren’t getting enough light to grow much. These seedlings persist as baby trees for years, even decades, until... something happens and the forest canopy opens up. Maybe large trees fall over in a storm (like the bomb cyclone we had a few months ago). When that happens, the waiting seedlings reach for the light, shoot up, and grow.

Could this be a metaphor for what people of hope and conscience need to do right now? Maybe we can think of our refugia work as advance regeneration—we create a million seedlings of justice, kindness, helping the poor, and we just keep them going until a good disturbance emerges and the canopy opens up. Then: we’re ready to grow like crazy, upward and green, and everyone can flourish.

You may or may not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and that’s okay. It *is* hard to believe. In some ways we are asked to believe the unbelievable.

But what is believable is how God has built resurrection, regeneration, refugia, or whatever we want to call it, into the very fabric of the created order. This, in itself, is a living hope. Signs of life that encourage us to not lose heart, to not let fear create a bleak landscape, but to know that, at the right time, a lush green landscape will emerge.

It might be hard to have “big” hope right now, but we can microdose on hope. (See, you can go home and tell people that the pastor said it’s okay to microdose. But finish the sentence! Microdose *on hope!*) *Find* the small things, *do* the small things; get with people who are committed to courage and kindness and who will support one another...

In this way we are planting the seeds, or the seedlings, that will eventually grow into something bigger and even magnificent, for the common good of all, and for the good of this amazing earth that God created.