
Holding on to Hope

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Easter 2 – Year B

“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” John 20:27

I have been listening to *Unbroken*. The book tells the story of Louie Zamperini, a former Olympic distance runner whose plane goes down over the Pacific during World War II. Louie survived the crash, a record-setting time adrift at sea in an ill-provisioned raft, unimaginable abuse in Japanese prison camps, and a tortured re-entry into life at home.

It is an amazing story of hope – our need for it, the ways others try to take it from us, and the cunning and creative strategies that we use to get it back.

Hope, it seems, is essential to sanity. Louie learned that you can lose your life on the open sea, or have it taken from you in a prison camp, long before your body takes its last breath. And, he learned that you can gain your life by fighting the circling sharks or stealing from your captors, not because you secure food or water, but because it restores your dignity.

The story of Thomas reveals something else about hope; it often depends on an experience of God.

Thomas was not with the disciples the week before when they had seen Jesus. They tell him what they have seen, but he rejects their witness, just as they had rejected Mary’s witness before Jesus appeared to them. Thomas wants what they had been given, to see the truth with his own eyes and to feel it with his own hands.

In his suffering, Thomas has lost his hope for the future that Jesus had promised. Jesus offers Thomas exactly what he asked for, though it seems that the offer alone is enough. Did you notice that the text doesn’t tell us whether Thomas actually touched Jesus?

The presence of the risen Christ was enough to transform Thomas. His hope is restored by the sense of absolution and forgiveness that is offered by Christ, by the sense of being part of the community of faith that forms around this experience. And, when his hope is restored, his faith in the future springs back to life as well.

The key, it seems, is being able to tell our story in a way that provides meaning to our lives.

When we are wrestling with loss, or suffering from pain, there is a tendency to let these things define us. But, it’s really up to us to define them. The challenge is to see these events as just part of a larger story, a story about who we are, and how we are going about doing what we are called to do.

We are each called to do something unique, something that no one else can do. It’s rarely easy to figure out, and sometimes we can’t do it by ourselves, but, once we do figure it out, then our lives take on new meaning. We know somehow that our stories are worth telling and, if they are worth telling, they are worth living.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it this way, “God is a question to which our lives are an answer.”

He says that God is asking, “What have you done with the gift I gave you, of life? How have you used your time? Is your

primary question, 'What can the world give me?' Or is it, 'What can I give to the world?' Have you sought a blessing, or have you been a blessing?"

When we have lost hope, we tend to look for answers to these questions inside of ourselves. When our assumptions about the world are broken down, or our expectations for our own lives are cast away, we begin to shut down, come apart, and turn inward, looking for answers that we will never find there.

But, even a faint echo of hope is enough to draw us out of ourselves. It opens our eyes to see that the burning bush is not being consumed. It puts our fingers on the pulse of life that pulls us forward into action, reminding us that caring for others is often the best medicine for the healing our own sick souls.

In arguing that hope transforms suffering, Rabbi Sacks tells a story about a woman afflicted with a rare condition that left her unable to stand or sit, even in a wheelchair. She was condemned to spend her life confined to a bed and in almost constant pain. Yet, she always wore a radiant smile, like sunshine on a gray day, as if she were always celebrating being alive.

Early on in her illness, she had decided to dedicate her life to helping others as incapacitated as she was. She had two phone lines installed next to her bed, learned how to use a computer and built a network of relationships that became the *Tikvah* (which means Hope) Help Line.

She contacted people who, like her, suffered serious illness or handicap. She became their adviser, mentor, and friend. She spoke to them regularly, helping them through crises, advising them on available resources, lifting them when they felt low. She devoted time to working for Jewish Care, the British welfare agency that ran the home where she lived.

Toward the end of her life, she received a prestigious award for her outstanding work from the Queen of England. She became the first person to be taken into Buckingham Palace on a hospital bed and receive her honor lying down. Characteristically, she said to those who congratulated her that the award was not for her; she had merely been delegated to receive it on behalf of her fellow sufferers.

She never gave her illness the chance to turn her in on herself or feel sorry for her condition. She turned outward, caring for other people's suffering, and in so doing was able to forget her own, or at least prevent it from demoralizing her.

Her hope is grounded in her experience of God.

She answered God's question about what she was going to do with her life by turning her suffering into a blessing for others.

Faith, as it turns out, is holding on to hope until our suffering is transformed into a blessing.