

The Hope That Is in Us

TEXT: 1 Peter 3:13-22; Acts 17:16-31

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Dearly beloved of God, St. Peter wrote, "In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience."

Let us pray...

Heavenly Father we come before you in the name of Your Son and in the power of Your Holy Spirit as the heirs of Your promise, our living hope. O Lord, prepare our hearts this morning as our ears receive Your Word so that our mouths may declare Your praise by testifying of the grace You've shown sinners through the sending of Your Son. In raising Him from the dead, You have raised us to new Life. In Him alone we find our hope and to Him alone do we set our hearts. May the words of my mouth be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord. Amen.

Here is a question to consider: what is 750,000 miles long, reaches around the earth 30 times, and grows 20 miles longer each day? What would you guess that that'd be? Well, for the sake of brevity, I guess I shouldn't leave you guessing. The answer is that it is the length of the line of people who are without Christ in this world. It is the length of a single-file formation of those who do not possess the living hope that sustains us and forms our faith. It is also a fairly old illustration based upon the data of its day. Given the earliest use of this illustration, the line has since come to wrap around the globe an additional five to six times. In fact, I was probably standing in that line around the time when this illustration was first presented. Of course, many, far too many, have taken my spot in the line since the day that I lost my place in it by being found in Christ almost

twenty-one years ago. In this great big world, about one third identify themselves, or are identified by others, as being Christians. One quarter of the world's population is claimed by Islam. A little more than a sixth are Hindu, less than a tenth Buddhist, and so forth. Ultimately, more than two-thirds of the people that populate this world are without the living hope that is found in Christ Jesus alone. We therefore have cause to be concerned.

We also have cause for concern when it comes to the other third of our world's population. Sure, many bear the label of Christian, but the statistics shed a startling truth that runs contrary to the claims. In Canada and the United States alone there are almost half a million Christian churches and yet, according to a twenty-two-year-old survey conducted by the Barna Research Group, about forty percent of Christians could not communicate the meaning of the term "Gospel" and more than half could not confess the content of John 3:16 (probably the most beloved and quoted verse that presents "the Gospel in a nutshell"). Of course, those stats have probably changed. Do we think that the change was for the better? That would be unlikely. Oh, but wait, the statistics for non-Christians are also noteworthy. Two thirds of non-Christians, according to that survey, did not know what was meant by the word "Gospel" and three quarters had no idea about the content of John 3:16 (even if they did see it bandied about in the bleachers at sporting events). Again, this is in the midst of half a million churches. Keeping in mind that two thirds of Canadians and three quarters of Americans identify themselves as Christians, something is definitely amiss. Of course, a great number are only nominal Christians (that is, Christians in name only), but still such statistics ought to cause us to

wonder. If even only one third of the number that identify themselves as Christians are in fact Christians, then how can we account for the other data? Well, it has been estimated that less than one twentieth of Christians confess their faith in Christ among those that God has placed in their midst. That means that about ninety-five percent remain silent. This is most unsettling. Most unsettling indeed.

Does a lack of zeal account for the silence? Perhaps. Still, having spoken with many Christians over the course of my days as a Christian, I've come to identify fear as the greater factor. There are many, many Christians who are bursting at the seams to share the Faith with even just their friends and family, but are stymied by their fears as each opportunity slips away. They want to tell others. They really do. They're just really scared that they'll make a mess of it all. They're worried that they won't have the right answers to the questions and objections that they fear will most certainly follow. So they remain silent as Satan rejoices. St. Peter encourages us to, "honour Christ the Lord as holy [in our hearts], always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in [us]; yet do it with gentleness and respect." I've no doubt that these Christians honour Christ in their hearts. This is why they wish to speak. It is the part about "a defence", "a reasoned answer", for the hope we share that makes sharing a scary proposition.

What needs to be pointed out from the start is that at no time are you expected or commanded to possess all the answers to all possible questions. That would be a misreading of the text itself and an unrealistic expectation, an unnecessary burden. No, the text simply states that you ought to be prepared to respond to the questions aimed at

the hope you have in Christ Jesus. It means that you ought to be able to express what you believe and why you believe what you believe about the hope you possess. St. Peter speaks of this hope earlier in his epistle. He writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again *to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. [...] Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

You see, we’re not given to win over people by winning arguments. No, more often in such a case you end up winning the argument at the expense of the person. Rather, we are called to tell others of the living hope that we possess, that hope which is founded upon the most pivotal event in human history: the Resurrection of our Lord! Our hope is not a pious piece of fluff, a mere wish, but an abiding promise from God guaranteed by the resurrection of His Only-begotten Son from the grave, being the first-born from the dead. It is Christ’s resurrection that assures us that our faith in the forgiveness of sins is not in vain, but secure and in keeping with God’s Word. The resurrection is no mere fiction as the empty tomb is an established historical fact. In fact, the resurrection is not only the testimony of our brethren from the past, but the only scenario that makes sense of all the established facts. This is why St. Paul makes it clear to the church in Corinth that, “if Christ has not been raised, [our] faith is futile.” This is

why the Apostle Paul approached the men of Athens with the very same message with which we are to answer those who ask us about our hope.

In Athens, St. Paul moved through the marketplace taking stock of all he saw and heard. While in Athens, as we heard earlier in our first reading from the Book of Acts, he “preached Jesus and the resurrection” in the Jewish synagogues. While in the Athenian marketplace, the Agora, he also “preached Jesus and the resurrection.” I think we’re beginning to see a pattern here. When brought to the Areopagus by the leaders of the leading schools of philosophy, the Stoics and Epicureans, he referenced the altar dedicated “To the unknown god” so as to steer his presentation towards the revelation of God in Christ as demonstrated by Jesus’ resurrection. St. Paul even quoted from their own poets. He took lines from poems about Zeus and used them to segue into his proclamation of “Jesus and the resurrection.” So, I think that it is safe to say that the very lynchpin to our living hope is found in the consideration of Christ’s resurrection. It is the vindication of both who He is and what He has done. It is the definitive event that transforms our lives and upholds us in our faith. In fact, in his epistle to the Church in Rome, the Apostle Paul emphasizes that it is *the* event in which Jesus is publicly declared to be God’s Son. Yes, it is the resurrection that affirms both His deity and the completion of His saving work among us. This is *what* we live and breath as Christians. This is *why* we live and breath as Christians.

So, I get it. Believe me, I do. I know that many want to bear witness to what the Lord has done for the sake of forgiving sinners. I too have known those moments of fear when faced with either *the thought* of questions that you believe you cannot answer or *the*

reality of having such questions thrown at you. At first I attempted to answer all such questions. I would spend copious amounts of time studying possible objections and queries only to find I was confronted by ones about which I wasn't prepared when the rubber hit the road. Eventually, I learned to get real by getting to the heart of the matter. I learned that I wasn't responsible for answering every genuine or even asinine challenge put forth by the non-believer. Instead, I returned to our living hope. I returned to preaching "Jesus (i.e. His person and work on the cross) and the resurrection." I returned to the basic foundation of Law and Gospel.

We can't be experts on every subject; and therefore, we cannot be expected to address every issue that is raised. We are not all historians, philosophers, scientists, or theologians who can handle the sacred texts in their original languages. Oh, sure, if needed, we can surely draw from the works of such men, but what we ought to stick to is what both we and our hearers know most fully: *ourselves*. The heart of the human problem is a problem of the human heart. God's Law reveals this problem to all because we all have it written upon our hearts. We all know what we ought to do and what we ought not do. This is true of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, or what-have-you. We all recognize that something is inherently wrong with us— even if the courts that create our laws or the courts of popular opinion try to tell us otherwise! The truth is that we are restless as a result of this common truth. Our conscience bears witness against us even when we manage to silence it for a season. We all recognize that something is inherently wrong with us. This "bad news" is what we must bring to the forefront before even considering sharing God's good news. It is by using God's Law

that we can circumvent any prolonged digression into answering potentially pointless questions. We ultimately fear these rabbit trails and holes that can lead us down different paths, away from the point we're trying to discuss... so let's not go down them! Let's stay on the path that cuts to the heart of the matter and prepares the way for the Gospel. We needlessly fear intellectual or pseudo-intellectual objections. God's Law is given to us as the means by which we can bypass the unbeliever's intellect (the place of argument) and speak directly to the conscience (the place of the knowledge of right and wrong). Oh, sure, there will be times when it is beneficial to address matters of ignorance or confusion found in the questions raised by those we encounter, but those should be few and shouldn't bog us down. We simply need to speak God's Law and then His Gospel. The Law afflicts those comfortable in their sins so that the Gospel may bring them comfort for their affliction through the forgiveness of sins. Law and Gospel in the light of the resurrection. This is how we answer in accord with the hope that is in us.

St. Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. We know this to be true for ourselves and we desire to share this with others. Only our unfounded fears can impede us. Certainly our fears are unfounded because we know, as the Scriptures attest, that no one can come to Jesus unless drawn by the Father and that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit through God's Word. Yes, the same Word of God that set the world in motion is the same Word which has the power to save as it accomplishes His purposes. The same Spirit that hovered over the waters of the deep—bring order to chaos— is the very same Spirit that can penetrate and reorder even the most darkened minds and hearts of sinful men. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, let us

honour our Lord by heeding His apostle's exhortation to give an answer to whosoever asks about the living hope we hold. Let us work toward this fearlessly. Let us work tirelessly to this end as if it all depended upon us even as we find our rest in the truth that it is entirely of God. God bids us to enjoin Him in His work by bringing His Word to His world. The numbers are daunting only if we take our sights off of the task we've been given to witness to those in our midst. The numbers may paint a picture that seems hopeless, but we know better because of the living hope we confess. We confess the risen Christ who alone can raise a fallen world. We confess the risen Christ who has raised us to Himself and promises to raise us on the Last Day to Life everlasting. Herein we find our hope. Herein is the only hope for the world around us. AMEN.