

Their hope was growing. For the past few years, they'd heard him teach with uncommon authority. They'd witnessed his amazing miracles, curing people's diseases and demons; filling stomachs with bread, and minds with wonder. Their hope bloomed, initially with anxious whispers, "We hope he is the one who will redeem Israel, who will throw off the oppressive Romans, and restore Israel to glory." Such was their hope.

But their hopes were shattered when he was crucified. As his lifeless body was laid to rest, their hopes were also laid to rest. Or so they thought.

As two disciples set off for a village called Emmaus on Easter afternoon, carrying their hope like shards of broken glass, a stranger, who would piece their hope back together, met them. That stranger was Jesus, the risen Savior himself. He opened their eyes to God's Word, explaining that all the horrors that shattered their hope were necessary for God's perfect plan of salvation. Finally, with their hearts burning as he explained Scripture, they were allowed to recognize the resurrected Jesus, and their shattered dreams became certain hope!

That's my hope for us. Our eyes opened to God's Word, I want us to see Christ. And seeing our Risen Savior, I hope we take to heart today, and every day, ***The Certainty of Our Hope*** in Christ.

That might sound somewhat contradictory. A certain hope? Webster defines **hope** as "**to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment**" or "**to want something to happen or be true.**" To desire. To want. But not "to be certain." Hope almost always holds hands with uncertainty.

"I hope I get accepted to my dream college." Maybe you will, but maybe your grades aren't good enough. "I hope I don't fall going up for my Confirmation blessing." Maybe you won't trip, but maybe you're a little clumsy. "I hope the doctors can heal me." Maybe there's a cure, but maybe this disease will kill you. As much as we hope, we can't be certain our hopes will be fulfilled.

So how then can we talk about the certainty of our hope? The same reason the Emmaus disciples had certain hope—they saw the resurrected Jesus. We too see our Risen Savior, in his Word!

The Apostle Peter wrote his first letter to some Christians facing intense persecution for their faith. That persecution left these new Christians uncertain of the certainty of their hope. So Peter writes a letter of hope to people feeling hopeless, beginning, ***"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.***

These Christians' faced the same struggle as the Emmaus disciples. Because of their seemingly dire circumstances, they feared their hope was uncertain at best, dead at worst. So Peter assures them, "your hope isn't dead!" Because Jesus, in whom their hope was found, is alive, they possessed a living hope! And so do we. That's why Easter gives us certain hope. Because the one who gives us hope is alive!

And because Christians have a living hope in a living Lord, our lives will be different. Peter instructs, ***"Live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear."*** I wonder how those persecuted people reacted to that. "Um...Peter, we're being persecuted because our faith makes us different from our neighbors, and you're telling us, "Stand out from the crowd even more?"

How do we react when Peter tells us the same thing; to live like temporary residents on earth whose real homeland is in Heaven? I'm sure you've noticed, Christians are increasingly pressured to conform our thoughts and actions to the world's standards. More and more churches contort the Bible to fit societal

norms. More and more kids, teens, and young adults are pushed to trade a spiritual worldview for a humanistic one. Worldwide, Christians are persecuted and martyred for their hope in Christ. There's immense pressure on Christians to live as a citizen of the world, instead of as a stranger here. How will we respond? How can we keep our hope in Christ?

Our motivation to live as strangers in this world is the life that was sacrificed so we can have eternal life and certain hope. Peter reminds, ***“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.***

Which would impact your life more meaningfully? A billionaire who paid a small fraction of his bank account to free you from prison time, or a billionaire who sets aside all his possessions, position, and power to don an orange jumpsuit and serve your prison sentence himself?

Jesus did the latter, but on an infinitely greater scale. He didn't suffer in prison, he literally suffered hell on the cross, taking the punishment for the world's sin on his sinless self. He didn't throw perishable gold or silver at the problem. He shed his perfect blood to buy us hell-bound sinners back from slavery to Satan. And that's the certainty of our hope: Jesus paid our punishment for sin, so our hope of eternal life is certain!

Peter continues, ***“He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”***

Before God created light, land, trees, turkeys, panthers, and people, he already designated his own Son to be the Savior of fallen mankind. But he didn't stay a longed-for hope. He became true man in Christ— setting aside his position and power, for you!

By the Holy Spirit's power through Word and Sacrament, God brought you to faith in God, to receive the forgiveness and eternal life Christ won for us. Faith in God, who raised Jesus back to life, so our hope for eternity is certain. Just like the Emmaus disciples, we marvel as our living Lord stands before us, assuring we possess a living hope!

Why live as a stranger when this world tries so desperately to convince you to put down permanent roots? Because our hope in Christ is certain, compared to the uncertain, perishable, and empty hopes this world offers.

Compare what we receive from two kinds of “fathers.” ***“Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.”*** Because of Jesus, God is your Father! And because of Jesus, we've been ***“redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers.”***

Peter uses the Greek word to highlight the nature of a Father: the closeness, intimacy, love, providence, and protection that we share with the God of the universe, our Father!

But he also says that our Father judges each person impartially. God doesn't turn a blind eye to our sin just because we're his kids. That personal relationship isn't a license to disobey, it's motivation for us to obey our Father even more!

The world hopes God is a winking grandpa that laughs away sin, tells us it's OK, and hands us ice cream. The world hopes that God doesn't exist, so morality can be individually determined. But good fathers don't let their children do whatever they want. They teach their children how to live in the way that's best for them.

Our Father won't look the other way so we can live in sin. An impartial judge looks at the evidence, not your name.

Maybe that makes you nervous, because the facts aren't pretty. We don't always live as strangers in the world; sometimes we live like worldly royalty. That's why Peter reminds us what Jesus has done for us. When the impartial Judge looks at the evidence, he sees Jesus, our Savior from sin; a bloodied cross, an empty tomb. Impartial evidence that our sins are paid for. Our hope is certain! Our eternity is won!

The past few weeks, it's struck me how many incredibly talented college football players who are basically guaranteed to make millions of dollars by getting picked in the first couple rounds of the NFL Draft have thrown it away by failing a drug test, assaulting someone, or getting a DUI. The foolish mistakes cause them to drop out of the early rounds or go undrafted. Their hopes and dreams were basically guaranteed. And yet they throw it all away for something meaningless and empty.

Don't the empty hopes of the world tempt us to do the same thing with our certain hope in Christ? Seeing 36 young people promise lifelong faithfulness to God at Confirmation brings me great joy. But my heart breaks to remember so many people who have broken those promises and cast aside their certain hope for the world's empty promises.

The hope that God doesn't exist, so they can live for themselves; the hope that pleasure promises fulfillment God can't give; the hope that they can't lose their faith, so they can stop feeding it. Those hopes have no certainty, perishable, doomed for death.

It'd be like if we were hiking, and stopped at a cold, blue river to refill our water bottles. As I fill my bottle with refreshing water, you hand me yours and ask, "Can you fill mine too?" I take your bottle, breath into it a bunch of times, cap it and hand it back to you. I filled your bottle, but not with something that will help or benefit you. If something is filled with useless contents, it's actually empty.

Such are the lives of those who build their hopes on perishable things. They might seem full, but they're actually empty. At best, their hopes are uncertain wishes. At worst, their hopes are idols dragging them away from God. Which "father" to follow? Which hope has real certainty? The answer is clear!

What does certain hope look like? It looks like the Apostle Paul on trial, facing death, refusing to deny his faith in Jesus' resurrection, because he saw the Risen Savior with his own eyes, and his hope was certain. Certain hope looks like a Christian man dying in the hospital, never wavering in his faith and joy, because his living Lord gave him a living hope of Heaven. Certain hope looks like 36 young men and women, promising to stay faithful to God, even unto death, because Jesus makes their hope certain like nothing else ever will.

People sometimes use the phrase, "Hope springs eternal," It's an optimistic thought that even when our hopes aren't met, maybe it will happen a different time. But as a Christian, our phrase is hope is eternal. No maybes, or uncertainty. Because our Lord is a living Lord, we have a living hope. Our eternity is certain, because Jesus lives.