

Certain Hope for Uncertain Times

1 Corinthians 15:19-20

19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed.

That's why we are here. Because 2000 years ago, Jesus of Nazareth was dead, but now he's alive. There are hundreds of eyewitnesses. It is the most reliably documented event in ancient history. Jesus lives! And that can give you certain hope—certain hope even in uncertain times.

WORLDLY HOPE

But imagine you weren't here. Imagine that instead of an Easter worship service about hope, you were attending an ancient Greek theater. The director is Euripides, the play Heracles. The theme of this play is "hope." If you came to learn the ancient Greek meaning of hope, you'd meet a man named Heracles, the son of a god. Heracles must perform twelve heroic tasks. And one task requires him to fight a monster in Hades, the realm of the dead. While he's there, an enemy kidnaps his wife and children and threatens them with death. Heracles is their only hope! So they hope that he will come to save them. And then, just in the nick of time, Heracles bursts through the door. This son of god is back from the realm of the dead! The chorus sings, "Hope lives! Hope lives!" Do you see the message? During difficult times, people need something to place their hope in!

But Heracles is blood-drunk. He's mad with rage from his fighting, so he draws his sword and cuts his wife and children to pieces. And that's what

the ancient Greeks thought about hope. You've got to have hope, but don't get your hopes up.

Our modern world teaches the very same thing. Last Easter, folks were saying, "I hope this virus calms down by summertime." Last summer, people said, "I hope our economy bounces back quickly." Last November, we wished, "I hope our problems go away after this election." Well, don't get your hopes up. Hope in this world is not so certain.

BIBLICAL HOPE

Aren't you glad you're not in a Greek theater on Easter morning? You're not out in the world. You're in church to hear about biblical hope—certain hope! **Hebrews 11:1** says, "**Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see.**" You can be confident about your hope. You can be sure, even though you don't see it.

How can you be sure? Well, imagine you're going to buy a car. Before you do, you bring it to me to check out the engine. I pop the hood and say, "Oh! The carburetor is no good. It's going to break within the year." You say, "Oh! You sound like you know cars. Have you done this before?" "No! I have no idea what I'm talking about." When I typed out this sermon, I couldn't even spell carburetor. Now, if a friend asks you, "Are you sure the carburetor is bad?" You'll say, "I don't know." But what if you took the car to a mechanic, who you've known for decades. And you've been through this before. You brought him a car, and he said, "Don't buy it. It will break down." You bought it, and he was right. Then you got another car. He said, "This one's great. It will run for years." And he was right. If that mechanic tells you your car will fail, and a friend asks you, "Are you sure?" You'll say, "Yes! This guy's always right."

Well, Jesus of Nazareth, in his earthly life, made the most astounding claims. He was in a sinking boat with professional fishermen who were terrified of drowning, and Jesus said, "There's no reason to be afraid." And he was right because, in an instant, they were at the shore. Multiple times, Jesus walked up to a dead person and said, "They're sleeping." And then

those dead people woke up. He was right. But do you know what claim Jesus made most often? “I’m going to be arrested by religious leaders. But then I’ll be executed by Romans through crucifixion. And three days later, I will come back to life.” He was right. He’s always right.

That’s what makes your hope certain. It is based on the promises of a man who has never been wrong. If anyone asks, “Are you sure?” Show them the evidence, **“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.” (1 Corinthians 15:20)**

CERTAIN HOPE FOR SALVATION

And that gives you certain hope for my salvation. Most people have worldly hope that they’ll be saved. I’ve asked a few people over the years, “If you died tonight, would you end up in heaven?” And do you know the most common response? “I *hope* so.” When I say, “Are you sure?” Their pronouns tell me they are not. They start with the word “I.” “I say my prayers.” “I go to church, not as often as I should, pastor.” “I avoid the big whopper sins—I never shot my neighbor in the face.” “I try to do more good than evil.”

“But are you sure?” “No.” You see, if my salvation depended on me, even a little bit, I could never be sure of it. How much money is enough offerings? How many prayers are enough? How many good deeds are enough? You can never be sure you’ve done enough for a perfect God.

But salvation, according to the Bible, does not depend on you. *Jesus* gave his entire life in service to God. *Jesus* paid the penalty for all human evil. *Jesus* earned salvation. And here’s how I know it worked. God, who is the gatekeeper of heaven, raised Jesus from the dead and welcomed him into heaven.

If I come up to you and ask you, “If you died tonight, would you end up in heaven?” You will say... “Yes!” And when I say, “Are you sure?” You’ll point to the evidence. Not what I’ve done; what Jesus did. That’s certain hope.

JESUS IS THE FIRSTFRUITS

Jesus died. Jesus rose. And you will too. God says, **“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”** (1 Corinthians 15:20) The firstfruits—

Jedidiah heaved up a bushel of wheat onto the cart. “Deborah, are you ready to go? You got the lamb? I saved a spot for him in the back. It’s going to take about four days, but when we get to Jerusalem, what a thrill! We’ll celebrate Passover, a big meal with our extended family. And then jump into the week-long celebration of the harvest—the firstfruits festival.” God told his people to celebrate Passover by sacrificing a lamb. Then celebrate the harvest with the firstfruits festival. Oddly, there’s no fruit involved. Fruit grows all summer, and you harvest in fall. But grain you’d plant in the winter by hand, so it took a few weeks. Then in spring it ripens gradually and you harvest over a few weeks. But the first bushel belongs to God. So Jedidiah and Deborah took their first fruits to God to say “Thank you!” for the harvest. But they were also saying, “We are sure! God, we can give you the first bushel because we are sure that we’ll go home, sickle in hand, and harvest some more. This bushel is evidence that there’s more wheat coming.” And Jesus resurrection is evidence that there are more resurrections coming.

So when I stand in a half-circle around an open grave with a family who just lost grandma, I tell them, “I am sure you have not seen the last of Grandma! She doesn’t just live in your memories. She won’t just be a soul floating around in heaven. Grandma, the one you know, will be back. As surely as a wheat plant produces wheat, in the end, this body will rise.” I am certain because Jesus won her salvation—and yours too. And Jesus is the firstfruits of all those who have fallen asleep.

You know what hymn we love to sing at funerals around here? “I Know That My Redeemer Lives.” Those words come from the Bible character Job. Remember Job? He family, money, and health. And he lost it all. The story of Job is like the year 2020 times 100. Sickness ruined his life. Loved ones

died. He had significant economic depression. Talk about uncertainty! What could this guy count on? In his book, Job says, “I wish I had children. I wish I were healthy. I wish I had some explanation for all this suffering. But I know- **I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh, I will see God. I myself will see him—with my own eyes. I and not another. How my heart yearns within me!**” (Job 19:25-27)

Job had certain hope that he would be face to fleshly face with Jesus—and with his family. So do you. So today we’ll sing “I know! I know that my Redeemer lives!”

CERTAIN HOPE CHANGES YOUR PRESENT

Certain hope transforms the way you deal with uncertainty in your present. And there’s still a lot of uncertainty here!

It stinks that we don’t know when the world will go back to normal. It stinks that our country is divided. It stinks that loved ones die and that you and I will die. But the way you handle the stinky parts of this life will be totally transformed when you realize the certain hope you have for eternity.

Picture it this way. Two workers work in identical circumstances-- identical cubicles, identical fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, identical uncomfortable chairs, identical computer, identical responsibilities. They have the excruciating job of copying numbers from one spreadsheet to another. They work ten hours per day for six days per week, no vacation—brutal job. The guy in cubicle A is told to work this way for a year, and you’ll have a chance to win \$10,000. The guy in cubicle B is given a signed contract. It says, “Work this job for a year, and we will give you \$1 billion.” Those two guys approach work differently, don’t they. The guy in cubicle A is ready to quit after one week! He says, “Come on, man. Let’s get out of here. You with me?” And the other guy is like, “No. No, I’m good here!” “You sure?” “Oh yeah. I’m certain.” He’s going to be motivated even when

he's worn out, and he might even have a bounce in his step. Because he has certain hope.

You have certain hope too. You will rise from the dead. You will see Jesus with your own eyes. You will feast forever in heaven. So now, like a guy with a billion-dollar contract, you approach even the dreary parts of this life with an otherworldly determination and a bounce in your step.

That's hope. It's certain! How can I be so sure?

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Alleluia. Amen.