

When Hope of the Resurrection Is All You've Got

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor

Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston Salem, NC

www.knollwood.org

February 17, 2019

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Last Sunday morning, we had something of a snafu. Lauren arrived at 8:00 am to discover the printed bulletins were for the wrong Sunday. So we came up with Plan B, which was to call out the hymns and other service elements, just like in the old days, when the hymns were listed in block letters on a wooden panel on the wall.

Most folks chuckled at the surprise and gracefully managed the inconvenience. In fact, many said they liked our bulletin-less Sunday and hoped we have some more! But if so, I'd rather that be a plan than an accident. As I later told the staff, "We can't blame this particular mishap on Marlin's leaving, because Marlin's still here. But prepare yourselves, because after Marlin's gone, there'll be a lot more uh oh's like this!"

Now for the uninitiated, Marlin is our able church administrator who recently resigned. After 7½ years on the job, he wants to pursue his first love, which is helping people through hands on service projects.

But for those of us who have worked closely with Marlin, it's hard to imagine life at KBC without him. Marlin is the unsung hero of so much that goes right at Knollwood and the silent partner in many of our successes. And no one will miss him more than me.

And yet I have learned in my life and ministry--often kicking and screaming, but I have learned and *am* learning--that every transition, even the unwanted ones, brings new opportunities. Transitions offer the chance to take a breath, reappraise, and refocus. They allow untapped potential to rise and new strengths to grow. Indeed, the respite and suspense that comes in turning the page from one chapter of life to the next; can even be a time of joy of anticipation as we wait to see how we will be surprised anew, by the ever unfolding, endlessly inventive love of God.

One year ago, many of us were reeling from Ken Wilson's resignation as our Minister of Music as is now true with Marlin; so it was true then of Ken. We couldn't imagine life at KBC without him.

And yet in the interim, we have been blessed with the extraordinary leadership and gifts of David and Lauren Winkelman, and Bryon Grohman. Now the poor soul who comes as our next Minister of Music, not only has to follow Ken, but also David and Bryon!

Thankfully, we get to keep Lauren!

And yet, let me reassure you: we are now actively interviewing candidates to serve as our next Minister of Music. And I like what I see! And I'm getting excited about what new surprises of God's grace and providence are waiting to ambush us on the next stretch of road.

Of course, the hardest transitions are not the ones that come in the ordinary course of things: a beloved staff member resigning to pursue new career opportunities, or the last of one's children taking flight from a now empty nest, to go to college.

No, the hardest transitions--the ones with the power to do us in--are the ones we don't see coming. Like a corporate buy-out that completely disrupts and may even dismantle our happy, settled life in Winston-Salem. Or the divorce that blind-sides us in mid-life. Or the loved one snatched away, much too soon, by a terrible accident or illness.

For these kinds of transitions--for these kinds of *deaths*--we need more than the heady confidence that things generally work out for the best. For these kinds of catastrophic endings--the ones that leave us with no idea what life looks like on the other side--we need the hope of a resurrection only God can give.

In one of his books, John Claypool tells about a prized plum tree that grew on his grandfather's farm. For years, the tree bore plump, juicy plums.

Then one year, a tornado came through and toppled the beloved tree. When folks came by to console the old farmer, they joined him by the fallen tree. "What was he going to do?" they wondered aloud.

Claypool's grandfather wisely answered, "I'm going to pick the fruit and burn the rest."

In the face of true catastrophe, where does one find the courage and hope "to pick the fruit and burn the rest"? For Christians, there can be only one answer. We find that brand of courage, that caliber of hope, in the resurrection of Jesus.

At the heart of the Christian story is the sobering tale of God's best and brightest Son struck down by a cruel, uncaring world. Jesus comes to teach and embody the love and truth of God. Yet he is met by rejection, betrayal, humiliation, suffering, a show trial, and an unjust death. His devastated disciples assume Jesus' death is the end of him and his movement. After all, death always meant "the end" before.

But in a stunning burst of divine glory and defiance, God calls Jesus from his grave on Easter morning, the sign and promise of God's forgiveness and new life. And the Jesus who comes out of that tomb is not the same as the broken, battered corpse who was placed within it. No, the resurrected Jesus is a vibrant expression of God's new kind of life, a life no sin or death can defeat.

"So how is it some of you can say?" asks Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, "that there is no resurrection from the dead? For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been

raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is futile, you are still in your sins, and we are of all people, most to be pitied.”

“*But in fact,*” Paul thunders, “Christ *has been raised* from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep!” For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is not a metaphor; for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is an actual, concrete, epic event. And it is the ground of our hope that no matter what sort of dead end we face, God is not stymied by it. Because the same power that called Jesus from his tomb, is yet let loose in the world.

Recently, 50 Knollwoodians joined nearly 1,200 other folks from area churches for a musical called “Union” at the Stephen’s Center. This new musical explores the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike that culminated in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The musical and a forum on race the next morning, was orchestrated by black, brown, and white Christian leaders in our city.

After the musical, an African-American woman, one of the producers of the show, came out and spoke to the audience. She noted that 2019 marked the 400th anniversary of the first slave ship coming to America.

And yet, she said with a contagious smile and conviction, 2019 is a “year of opportunity.” Because this could be the year that God’s people finally come together to acknowledge and address the scourge of racism, by which she meant not just expunging ugly language from our vocabulary, but unseen obstacles and barriers to people of color in our schools, economy, and criminal justice system.

The week after that powerful and moving musical, we were shocked to see Virginia’s governor, and then other politicians, exposed for making fun of African-Americans by masquerading with black face in their youth. It was a painful reminder of how a privileged, white culture treated people of color, first as slaves, and then with contempt.

Now for the many Knollwoodians who care deeply about this plight and shame, and for the people of color who daily experience it, this might seem a hopeless situation. And yet that Union musical--written by the son of a black panther and the grandson of a KKK clansman-- was a powerful reminder that faith is a potent antidote to despair, especially a faith birthed in an empty tomb on the far side of a cross.

During the bleakest days of the civil rights struggle, Martin Luther King, Jr., confessed he was no longer an optimist. How could he be, given the dark, sinister forces arrayed against him?

And yet, said Dr. King, he still had hope. Because optimism is based in what *others* may do, while hope--true, biblical, Spirit-breathed hope--is based in what *God* can do.

Near the end of his life, Baptist preacher and maverick Carlyle Marney observed, "When I die, I am going to get to the place where I will have to say, 'If there is anything more, it is up to God. I have no power to make anything else happen.'"

At some point, we all come to that place where our energy is spent and our hope is gone, and if anything else is going to happen, God is going to have to do it. But the resurrection of Jesus means that kind of hope is not a pipe dream, but a reality-based gift of the risen Christ. For our God is able to create surprising new beginnings; where we saw only a soul-crushing dead end.

There you were, when the life you had taken for granted, came crashing in. Maybe it was a health crisis, or a betrayal by someone who promised to love you forever. Or maybe the work you felt called to do, didn't materialize or sputtered out.

You weren't sure who you were without that someone or something to tell you. And you wondered if you'd ever be happy or whole again. But somewhere, somehow, in that dark night of the soul, a tiny, pin prick of light began to pulsate and then to shine. Maybe you didn't know it at the time, but it was the risen Christ, showing up to lead you out of that darkness and to open your eyes and heart and hands to the future God was trying to give.

In time, you came to trust this unseen but ever-present companion. Not because you wanted to, but because you didn't have any other choice. Until, in His company you discovered the person you always had it in you to be, but never could have become until all the old supports and comforts were gone.

In a European art gallery, there hangs a painting that depicts Faust engrossed in a chess game with his adversary, the devil. The game appears to be in Satan's hand. Satan sits back, self-satisfied, while Faust peers at the board in despair, unable to devise a way out of his dilemma.

In the gallery where this painting hung, many chess players viewed it over the years. All agreed Faust was faced with an inevitable checkmate.

But then one day, a famous chess master happened by. Naturally, he was intrigued by the picture and waved his party. He stood engrossed, contemplating the game. For a long while, he stood immobile, intently studying the pieces.

Suddenly, the quiet of the gallery was shattered by the shout, "It's a lie! It's a lie! The King and His knight have another move!"

That's the riveting truth I'm slowly discovering and learning to trust: that our God and his Christ, the King and the knight, *always* have another move. And this God excels at taking the anguish of what we thought was the end and turning it into the birth pangs of a whole new life.

Yes, there will come a time, when the hope of resurrection is all you've got. And that's when you will discover that resurrection is not just something that happened in the long ago and far away. Rather, by the grace of God, resurrection can happen even now . . . in *you*.

O holy Christ, bear us through the cross of our deepest despair. Then meet us at the empty tomb where what we thought was the end, becomes by your grace, a whole new life.

In your name we ask this of our loving Heavenly Abba, Amen.