

“A Living, Breathing, Hope”

Hope Church

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This is a big day in the life of Hope Church! It's quite something to be 150 years old. It's a day full of wonderful worship, special music, and fresh liturgy. Among other things, today is a family of faith reunion, a chance to reconnect with former friends and pastors, a gathering-in of folks from other times and places, who like me, remain connected with this congregation while living several hundred miles away. Thank you for inviting me back into the fold in such a special way today.

As it turns out, I'm not the first person to travel from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY to preach in this pulpit. My older brother, Mark, sent me a delightful journal entry from the travel diary of a Dutch sociologist, Jacob Van Hinte, who wrote extensively in the Netherlands about the Dutch emigrant experiences in America but did not visit here until 1921. These are some of his impressions of Hope Church, 91 years ago on Sunday, August 7, 1921:

A church day. At ten-thirty in the morning to the aristocratic Hope Church, on West Eleventh Street, where I am seated in the Van Schelven pew between the old Mr. and Mrs. Van Schelven. I get a peculiar impression of this church. . . [At times] I was reminded of a town theater!

The violin solo by Miss Ruth Keppel, however, made me think of a concert hall. A short pithy sermon by Rev. Van der Meulen from Louisville, Kentucky, gave the “reformed” stamp to this gathering, which was full of variety. No less for the hymn responses than for the modern sung psalms.

I thought of the theater again once outside of the church: numerous beautiful cars, busily talking women and men. Well dressed young people. Some of them introduced themselves to me. Two of them, a young man and his girl friend even knew some Dutch. Easy, smart young people. And those were the descendants of those stiff, reserved, dumb farmers. That attractive, clean-cut fellow and that charmingly dressed,

elegant young girl! I felt stronger than ever that the migration to America had been a blessing to them.¹

We never know how we will be remembered by history!

Truly, it's a joy to worship with you this morning not only as a daughter of my parents, Jim and Jean Cook, but also as a daughter of Hope Church, and of the RCA. I couldn't help but notice in your historical material that "A highlight of the Hope Church Centennial observance was the recognition of the Sons of Hope Church who have entered the ministry." No mention of daughters which reminded that a lot has changed in 50 years! It's a privilege to be one of the many daughters of this church who are and always have been involved in ministries of all kinds both lay and ordained: ministries of music, mission work, pastoral care, fundraising, advocacy, not to mention parenting, writing, teaching and preaching.

As I look around this morning, I realize how many of you who have had a hand in shaping my life through your respective role as pastors, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, college professors, friends of my family, classmates, colleagues in ministry, mentors, and family members. I am tempted to call you out by name, but there are simply too many of you and you know who you are. I want to thank you for the countless ways that you have each nurtured me and been a significant part of my family's life – in times of grief as well as times of joy – over the past 49 years. This church will always be my "home church" and I know first-hand some of the ways you bear witness to and embody your anniversary theme, "A Living Hope." Simply said, *a living hope is hope that gives life*. And give life you do – to one another, to this community, and to this wounded world. Thanks be to God for the living hope of Hope Church!

Thanks be to God!

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love.

Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above.

Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the gloom of doubt away;

Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.

¹ Peter Ester, Nella Kennedy, and Earl Wm. Kennedy, eds., *The American Diary of Jacob Van Hinte* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Van Raalte Press / Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 73-75.

We sang (the poet, Henry Van Dyke's) lovely words set to Beethoven's famous (Ode to Joy) melody a few moments ago, and I believe they fully capture the spirit of this day and the Spirit that meets us in the living word of today's scripture lessons that we have just heard (I Peter 1:3-9 and Luke 24: 36-48).

For the passage that introduces the great theme of your anniversary celebration begins in the Jewish tradition of a blessing addressed to God: **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!** (exclamation point!) The first letter of Peter was written to be read by early Christians in the context of worship, so the language of praise sets its tone from the start.

And then comes the punch line: **By God's great mercy God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.** Wow! As we all know, any birth is a miraculous mystery given by God. In this passage we are brought back into the birth canal of God's womb, and birthed into a living hope, not just your run-of-the-mill generic hope, but a particular hope, one that is alive because Jesus is alive.

All of that is said in only the first phrase of a sentence that to the frustration of any English teacher, literally runs on in the NRSV for 3 full verses. As one commentator put it, this opening blessing is "pregnant" with the "great themes of the letter;" "the author overwhelms our capacity to consider so much so swiftly stated."² That has been my experience as I've been indwelling this passage from I Peter and I think it's helpful to name; this service and your glorious anniversary theme are overwhelming – in the best sense of that word. They are a surplus of grace. The wisdom of your anniversary planning team is reflected in the various spaces they offer during the weeks and months ahead for you to keep letting the theme work on, in, and among you, guiding you into the future. "Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life!"

Given how much we have already experienced this morning and how much is yet to come this afternoon, the sermon provides a time of relative stillness, a moment to pause, take some deep breaths, and breathe in the beauty and wonder of this worship space that has been in the making for 150 years. Notice the people next to you in the pews. These are your fellow pilgrims on this anniversary journey, companions on your journey of faith, your journey of life.

² Fred B. Craddock, *First and Second Peter and Jude* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 23.

As my mother used to say when I would sit down to practice the piano but was a bundle of distracted energy, “get your bearings.” So this is a time for us to slow down together and “get our bearings.” In the poetic words of the opening hymn, “hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above.” It takes time for flowers to unfold; it takes time for our hearts to unfold. The bright light of the noonday sun is a lot to absorb. I Peter’s proclamation/doxology/homily that “by God’s great mercy we have been given the gift of a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” comes to us with a blinding brilliance; it takes time to let it sink in.

This was also true for Jesus’ disciples who had walked and talked with Jesus for some years before he was crucified and buried. In today’s gospel lesson from the last chapter of Luke’s gospel, we find these same disciples huddled together in confusion and grief at the close of a most disturbing day. The version of this scene in the gospel of John says that “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear.” The atmosphere in this suffocating space is overcast “with clouds of sin and sadness.” The “gloom of doubt” bears down heavily upon them. Like any group of people meeting after a tragic current event, they are absorbed in swapping stories of what’s been happening.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women with them are still reeling from their amazing experience at early dawn at the empty tomb. Two men in dazzling clothes had asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead, claiming that Jesus had risen! They keep trying to convince the other apostles but once again, the men don’t really want to hear what the women have to say. So Peter goes to see for himself and he, too, doesn’t know what to make of finding the tomb empty except for some cast aside linens. Cleopas and his companion have just come from an incredible encounter with a stranger on the road to Emmaus who turned out to be Jesus and then vanished from their sight. So it’s safe to say that the group gathered had a lot to discuss together.

While they are talking about these unsettling things, Jesus himself suddenly stands among them, greeting them with what they most need even if they are too overwhelmed to take it in. “Peace be with you.” It’s really not very surprising that they were “startled and terrified.” Who wouldn’t be? And it’s really not very surprising that they thought they were seeing a ghost. I’m guessing that we may secretly wonder that too.

As he has done time and again, Jesus tries to calm, comfort, and reassure them. “Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” Their anxious

efforts to explain all that has been happening prevents them from fully perceiving that the “peace that passes all understanding” has come to them. Skepticism blocks their ability to embrace the living, breathing Truth that stands face-to-face in front of them. So he invites them to look, touch, and see his hands and his feet. We watch as glimmers of joy begin to “melt the clouds of sin and sadness and drive the gloom of doubt away.” But it still seems “too good to be true.” The disciples waver. “In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering,” so he gives them one more empirical sign of his physical reality; he asks them for something to eat and then eats in their presence.

Then and only then does he become their familiar rabbi. He returns them to their roots in the Torah, the prophets, and psalms; “he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” As in time-lapsed-photography we can almost watch their “hearts unfold like flowers before Him, opening to the sun above.” Before Jesus departs a final time and promises the gift of the spirit which we celebrate as Pentecost, they – and we – are declared “witnesses of these things.” They – and we with them – are charged to tell the good news of God’s grace to all the nations.

There isn’t a bigger “leap of faith” or “step in trust” than the one Jesus asked his followers to take that day 2,000 years ago. I find it comforting that Jesus met their fear and difficulty believing with gentleness and compassion. If the ones who knew Jesus best had so much trouble believing in his bodily resurrection from the dead when he stood right in front of them, is it any wonder that we who have not seen him as they did then, sometimes struggle to fully believe it now?

But believe this our ancestors did or we wouldn’t be here today. I Peter’s words ring out to us still like the bell in the old church tower: “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy. . .”

This new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is nothing short of a miracle and a great mystery, as big as or bigger than the births of babies we have experienced or witnessed directly. Like all births it’s a gift from God. And it doesn’t come without “suffering various trials” or “being tested by fire” (I Peter 1:6-7). While it may feel at least some of the time, if not most of the time, “too good to be true,” it’s a truth that has somehow survived down through the centuries. It survived the trip from the room where the disciples huddled together in fear in Jerusalem to the churches in Asia Minor who were the first recipients of letters like I Peter. This living hope in a living, breathing Jesus survived – sometimes more intact than others – the fallible processes of biblical

canonization and creedal councils, the rigors of the Reformation, traveling on to the Netherlands, New Amsterdam, and then giving birth to churches like this one here in Holland, MI in 1862. That's quite an inheritance – one to remember, cherish, and nurture as you have and continue to do!

You have been called to embody this living hope and to share it with others as you do through good stewardship of the rich resources residing in this congregation.

You drink deeply from your roots, remembering the stories of your Jewish, Christian, Dutch, (African, Spanish), and other ancestors. You give thanks for the saints who have died before you and let them live on in your hearts. You tend well the trunk of your tree of life through creative and participatory worship, Bible study, and prayer groups. You spread your branches wide through programs that stretch your faith, whatever your age or stage in life – through practices that take care of the spirit, the body, and the earth.

You prune here and there making room for new growth. You link arms with persons of other faith traditions through engaging “The Charter for Compassion.” You have signed onto “Room for All,” communicating to our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers that there is room around the table for everyone. You nurture the budding new life of children and young people through Sunday school, youth trips, creative worship, the Day Care Center, Community Action House, and Kids Hope USA. You also suffer with and support one another as you meet fears of aging and times of illness with compassionate care and presence. You accompany one another through the valleys of the shadow of death, refusing to give death and despair the final word.

In this splendid season of spring, on this anniversary day also known as Earth day, I urge you to fully embrace your tree of life. Drink deeply from your roots; tend the trunk of your tree well, and spread your branches wide, ever being open to new growth. And enjoy the fruits of your labors! Be the living hope you have been called to be!

In closing, hear the words of the Spanish saint, Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

May grace and peace be yours in abundance! (I Peter 1: 2b)