

A Living Hope

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Gordon Wiersma

Text: I Peter 1:3-9

Did you know that the meaning of the word 'literally' has changed? In addition to meaning 'in a literal manner; exactly', as in, 'he literally fell on the floor laughing' – (sure – that happens); now some online dictionaries are adding that literally also means 'used for emphasis while not being literally true', as in, 'we literally died laughing' – (umm...no you didn't...you're still alive). So, now, 'literally' also means 'not literally' – or as one article about this put it: 'The definition of literally is no longer the literal definition of literally.' I personally, am not a big fan of this shift, and I have tried to hold out for the established definition of literally, summed up in the t-shirt that says: "misuse of the word literally figuratively drives me crazy".

I don't know, it may be a lost cause - literally! – what words mean and how people use them do change – but in the arena of lost causes I have another changing-word-meaning situation I want to take on today – one that seems too far gone to do much about, but important to point out nonetheless. I'm talking about the word 'hope'. Now I remember this example from a sermon way back to my childhood days, with Rev. Roger Van Harn preaching at Grace Christian Reformed Church in downtown Grand Rapids. I suppose it brings to light some depth of my geekiness that I recall a sermon from my childhood, but the example does involve sports so that's something. Rev. Van Harn said: 'here's how we usually use the word 'hope', we say: I really hope the Detroit Tigers win the World Series this year!' That got my attention - I thought, that's right, I do

hope that! – and I still hope so this year. But Rev. Van Harn pointed out that this use of the word ‘hope’ is pretty much wishful thinking – something you would like to have happen. Sometimes ‘hope’ is a bit more active, but it’s quite often a wished-for outcome that you don’t really have much control over. (I should point out, though, that saying ‘I hope the Chicago Cubs will win the World Series’ is even beyond wishful thinking – more to the point of delusional!).

...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... I Peter 1:3

Let’s try that passage with how we usually talk about hope:

‘God has given new birth into a living wishful thinking...’? (I don’t think so)
 ‘...into a living desire for something in the future’? (maybe) ‘...into a living goal I’m going to work at’? (not exactly).

The typical ways we speak of hope don’t fit with this passage - those ideas of ‘wish, desire, goal’. But in looking at definitions of ‘hope’, I came across what was noted as an ‘archaic’ meaning of ‘hope’ which was this: ‘a sense of trust’. Well, that’s just what Rev. Van Harn said back in the day - which is that the meaning of hope in the Bible is very different than how we usually use hope today – in fact, the meaning is often the opposite – LITERALLY! Biblical hope has nothing to do with wishful thinking, but has everything to do with trust, confidence in God. Hope may have something to do with the future, but it mostly has to do with how you see and live in the present.

I realize it’s a lost cause to try to change back the meaning of hope, as we are very accustomed to using it as a wish – but perhaps that’s not really the point anyway, because there’s nothing wrong with talking that way for all sorts of

things. It's more a realization of the need to hold on to this other meaning of hope too – of biblical hope as it is given to us.

...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...

I think what's so striking here is how hope is not so much a concept, as it is a living, organic reality. Just there in that verse it speaks of new birth given, of hope as a living reality, and of the life of the Risen Christ – hope has to do with new life for us created by the presence of the Risen Christ among us. So the idea of trust, confidence as the substance of hope comes from the reality of who God is. Hope is not a future focus so much as it is a grounding in the continuity of who God is in past, present and future – a God of creation, of life, of resurrection. The reality of who God is creates hope – a trust that God is with us and the confidence to follow in God's ways. And it seems to me that when we look at our world, our lives, it becomes very clear as to what kind of hope has something substantial, relevant to say to us and to our world:

- in the midst of the deep violence and conflict present in our world among nations and peoples, between religions and races, what kind of hope can we witness to? – wishful thinking? 'we really hope it gets better!' – is that all we have to offer as followers of the Risen Christ?

A Living Hope

In this broken world our hope is that the Spirit of Christ is present to speak life to deadly ways; our witness is a trust that following God's ways of reconciliation and peace gives hope, IS hope; our witness is the confidence to

continue in God's ways of life when it is not easy or practical or even effective, because hope lives in us and creates life through us. You want a living hope? –missionaries Marlin & SallyVis witnessing to peace in Israel/Palestine; books to Rwanda; – that is living hope.

- in the midst of degradation to creation, in the consequences of excess reflected in climate change, in the harm brought to creatures and communities through misusing the gifts of God's earth, what kind of hope can we witness to? – wishful thinking? 'It's Earth Day Sunday and we really hope things get better!' – is that all we have to offer as followers of the Risen Christ?

A Living Hope

Our hope is the Risen Christ among us to speak life to destructive habits and short-sighted policies; our witness is the trust to pattern our lives in ways that bring change, renewal, restoration for creation; our witness is the confidence to follow God's ways even when it is not easy or convenient; such things are the substance that IS hope, grounded in the God of creation. You want Living Hope?– a semi-trailer filled with E-waste to recycle; and taking time to smell the wildflowers – that is living hope.

- in the midst of riches and poverty, income disparity, social issues of race and gender and economy, what kind of hope can we witness to? – wishful thinking? 'we really hope it gets better!' – is that all we have to offer as followers of the Risen Christ? (and then perhaps go and place our real trust elsewhere – Democrat; Republican; Tea Party; Green Party – you name it...)

A Living Hope

Our hope is the Risen Christ who lives among us in order that human community, dignity, abundance, joy is given life and reality; our witness is to trust that patterning our lives in the ways that bring unity, reconciliation and justice will be used by God to create such community; ours is the confidence to abide in such ways even if we are told it is wishful thinking; such is the substance of, the living breathing presence of, hope grounded in the resurrection. You want Living Hope? – look at a CROP Walk this weekend; look for Bread for the World letter-writing next week; sewing machines to Haiti; a Think Hope auction for Habitat houses in Holland – that is living hope.

- as we walk through life, facing day to day challenges and choices, encountering conflicts, brokenness sometimes severe, life and loss and death - what does God offer us? wishful thinking? 'hope things gets better for you!' – is that all God gives to us as followers of the Risen Christ?

...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...

We have no need for wishful thinking, nor even just for hopeful ideas or optimistic goals. We are given hope that is not a concept but a person – the Risen Christ among us as life, courage, peace; we are given hope that is not a fleeting feeling but an abiding trust in God's presence. It's the kind of hope that in our lives guides and confronts and renews and births us in the ways of life, speaking to all we are wrestling with, and then also calling us as a witness to all around us. Our lives and our world are just the same: they require not wishful thinking, but living hope.

During Hope Church's 150th anniversary year in 2012, one of the many good things of that time of celebration and discernment was that this verse from I Peter 1:3, "A Living Hope", was received as a defining and guiding scripture for Hope Church. You'll see it on business cards...you'll find it at the top of meeting agendas – you'll hear it in vocabulary of our congregation's conversation. I'm very grateful for that, as it's been meaningful for me to have that scripture become rooted and fruitful for our ministry. And what I always remember is that it is 'a living hope...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ'. That is what distinguishes and defines what it means to be Hope Church – to be a living Hope. Not, 'Hope Church, the place for wishful thinking'; not even 'Hope Church, the place for optimistic plans' (helpful as those may be). Hope Church is grounded in a living hope which is the presence of the Risen Christ – it is God's gifts of life in Christ that we trust for our lives and that we witness to with confidence for our world. Such hope in Christ is why we exist. You want Living Hope? – well, here we are! - a living hope that gives life to us and brings life through us to God's world – literally! Thanks be to God. AMEN.