

“WHY BELIEVE? IV - THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT!”

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Acts 2:1-21

John 14 (selected verses)

Did you ever hear about the woman who went to talk with her pastor to plan her funeral? She went through all the details, telling him how she wanted everything to go, then she ended with what the pastor, at first, thought was a rather odd request. She said she wanted to be buried with a fork in her hand. “A fork in your hand?” he said, “Really? Why is that?” “Well,” she replied, “you know, how when you’re at a nice family dinner and the plates are being cleared, someone will say, ‘Keep your fork, the best is yet to come!’” I want people to know that I believe that when they look down and see me at my funeral.”

The best is yet to come! That woman had a unique way of showing what all of us, as Christians, believe - the best is yet to come! Today, in this final sermon in the series, “Why Believe?” - the answer is just that, “because we know the best is yet to come!” or in more common vernacular, “we ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

Today’s Gospel lesson tells us all about the future, and what lies ahead for us. The words belong to Jesus, and in this lesson, He is about to face His death on the cross, and He’s talking to His disciples. Things have been going rough for Him and them, and He knows they’re afraid, they don’t know exactly what lies ahead, but they do know that if things happen as He says they will, He will be gone from their presence - and they are really afraid.

And so He says these wonderful things to them, and centuries later, He says them to us on this Day of Pentecost. That there is no reason for their hearts to be troubled. He is going, yes, but when He goes He is going to prepare a place for each of them, and one day they will be with Him in that place. And in that place all will be well - there will be no more pain or sorrow or sighing, no struggles, only peace.

And in the meantime, while He is gone, He will send the Holy Spirit to them, and we know that He did, because we heard the account read of the powerful events of the Day of Pentecost - when the wind, the Spirit of God swept across them and dwelt among them.

The last thing he says to them is “peace - peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you - not a shallow, short-lived peace that the world will try to offer you; but a deep, inner peace that will be with you always, in all the moments of your life - so

do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

These verses in John 14 are among the most beautiful and moving in all the Bible. For they do indeed remind us that the future is bright for those who follow Christ - it is certain and sure.

Now, I know you might be thinking, “well, that’s all well and good, that the future is bright, but what does that mean for my life now?” Well, here’s what it means:

First, because we know what the future holds, because we know the end of the story, as it were, we can live our lives more fully now, every single day. When you’re uncertain about the future, you tend to be more cautious, more tentative. But knowing the end of the story, that in the end, because of Christ, all will be well, we look at life differently - we can live it more fully and lively and passionately.

Just look at how knowing that affected Peter. Peter so badly failed Jesus by denying knowing Him in the courtyard after Jesus was arrested, and for a while, anyway, he hid out in guilt and shame. Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection and Peter knew that he had been forgiven, but after the Spirit descended on Pentecost, he was a changed man. He lived a different life - a life freed up from fear and shame, a life willing to go out on a limb for Jesus and for the fledgling church he was starting, a life willing to speak out even when it was risky. It didn’t matter to Peter what would happen, if it would even cost him his life for doing it, because he knew that the future was bright, he knew where he would be going, and he knew whose hands he was in, and would be in. Trusting in a future promised by Christ made a total difference in the way Peter lived - and it can make a total difference for you and me.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said that he and so many other South Africans were able to endure all that they had to endure under the horrors of apartheid because they knew what the future held, or in his words, “We knew the end of the story. God wins!”

Trusting in a future that is bright, God’s future given to us in Christ, we can live life fully, faithfully, passionately - because we know the end of the story. God wins!

Secondly, by believing that the future is bright, we can endure whatever life brings our way. I talked about Bishop Tutu and his fellow South Africans already - they certainly learned that. And Peter, as well. Even after Pentecost, the road was not smooth for Peter. He faced persecution and danger, people did not always embrace his preaching and teaching with open arms. Just like with Jesus, they didn’t like the gospel message he brought, and many times his life was in danger.

In fact, in the end, he too, died cruelly on a cross.

But it was okay, and the way Peter got through all the struggle and heartache, was because He knew that God was with him, and he knew that even if the worst happened, that he lost his life, he knew where he was going, and it was to that place prepared just for him.

The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was interred in a horrible prison camp during World War II. On April 8, 1945 he was executed by Nazi soldiers. He had been leading a worship service for his fellow prisoners, and suddenly two evil looking men burst into the room, and one of them shouted, "Professor Bonhoeffer, come with us!" Everyone there knew what that meant, that he was about to be executed. But as he walked out of the room and toward the gallows, he was heard to say this: "This is the end, but for me, the beginning of life." (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul That Only God Can Fill*, "Eternal Life in God," p. 59)

No matter what life brought him, hardship, imprisonment, death, no matter what, Bonhoeffer knew he could get through it, because he knew the future was bright - that the end, in the world's eyes, at least, was really just the beginning. And friends, because we believe, we can do the same thing, we can get through whatever life brings our way.

On this wonderful morning in our church, when six young people stand before us to claim the name of Jesus, and become members of His church, we don't want to think that there will be hard times in their lives. But there will be, that's just part of life. (Some of them already know that all too well!) So the best thing we can tell them on this momentous day is that, no matter what, no matter what troubles come their way, God is still with them, and the future will always be bright, because they know the end of the story, and the end of the story is life!

Finally, knowing that we live in anticipation of a bright future, we can dwell in peace - the peace that Christ gives us. We have no need to worry overmuch, we have no need to ultimately fear anything, because of Christ's peace, and Christ's promise of a secure future.

I think, on this Memorial Day weekend, of those who serve in the military of our country, and those who have served in the military, and I know that it's the peace that Christ offers that kept them going or keeps them going through their service. In the midst of the danger and fears they face, it is the peace of Christ that carries them through it all. You couldn't face what they face, see what they see, do what they have to do, without the strength of Christ and the peace that passes understanding within you. You just couldn't do it.

Having that peace makes all the difference. When we were studying Adam Hamilton's book about the last words of Jesus from the cross a few months ago, and we were dealing with his words, 'Into thy hands I commit my spirit,' Hamilton said that those were words that Jesus had been saying since childhood, every day - words that no doubt, filled him with peace. "I commit my spirit to you Lord," "I trust you to care for me," "I know the peace that comes from that."

Oh, in this world of our's, how much we need to experience peace. It is a world in turmoil so much of the time, a world of strife, a world of struggle; a world where too often people work against each other, not for each other; a world where it's black and white, we don't want to give an inch from our tightly held beliefs and positions. It is a world fraught with tension. Oh, how we need the peace that only Christ gives - a deep, inner, lasting peace - a peace that carries us through our days.

We can have that peace, when we look ahead and know what the future holds. All will be well!

You might have heard me speak of the wonderful hymn writer Natalie Sleeth before. She wrote the hymn we're about to sing in just a few moments, "Hymn of Promise." She actually wrote it for her husband, when he learned that he had a terminal disease. From the day of his diagnosis to the day of his death, it was only 21 days. Remember the last line of the hymn, "In our death, a resurrection, at the last a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Sometime after that, Natalie began to have her own health problems, and she knew that her grandchildren were afraid. So she wrote a story for them and talked about how God had a plan for her life, and that when she died, there would be a place for her in heaven, and she would be happy there, and they would remember her with happy memories.

On the last day of her life, as her family surrounded her bed, she began to hear music and see light in front of her, and feel a deep, happy feeling in her soul. In the last moments of her life, she had a glow in her eyes, and a smile on her face, and she whispered her very last words, "It's good! It's good! It's good!" (Ibid., p. 58)

It is good, my friends! What lies ahead for us is good, very, very good! We have a place promised to us, a place prepared for us, a place of joy, freedom and peace. So, no matter what lies ahead, all will yet be well. We can live fully, freely, passionately; we can endure whatever comes our way; we can be at peace - because the future, in God's hands, and through the love of Jesus Christ, it is bright, it is good, it is so good! So, "do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Amen.