

Windows: Hope
Delivered April 6, 2013

One of my favorite relationship memories (and one of my greatest triumphs as a husband) took place on Rita's 30th birthday. Our kids were pretty young at the time and she was working really hard at home and at work so I really wanted to give her a big party for her 30th birthday. I struggle to confess it this morning, but in the right circumstances I can actually be pretty sneaky and secretive, so I decided that I was going to try to pull off a surprise party for her. The kids were young enough that they could easily be kept out of the loop without tipping her off that something was up.

So for a few months I worked behind the scenes to try to pull off this surprise party. We needed to get food there, and then we needed to get people there, and finally (hardest of all) we needed to get Rita to my parents' house in Connecticut without her knowing that we were going there for her party. I managed to get her mom and her sisters from West Virginia up to Connecticut without her knowing. I was able to have her best friend from Maryland make the drive up, and we had a bunch of friends from church make the drive to participate.

The whole time I was driving to Connecticut I just kept hoping that nothing was going to happen to ruin the surprise that I had worked so hard to keep from her. Up until the moment we pulled into the driveway she had no idea that we were there for her birthday party. And when we walked down and everyone surprised her she was ecstatic. But the best moment of the day was when, after all the local friends and family had appeared, her mom and sisters came walking down the stairs to say "Happy Birthday!" Just the look on her face made all that planning and preparing totally worth it for me.

Most of us have probably, at one time or another, had the experience of working towards a significant goal or dream whether it's in the form of an event or a relationship. It can be an incredibly rewarding experience, but you also know that the end result you're working towards doesn't guarantee a stress-free path to the reward. There will be moments of struggle along the way where you will question whether or not you will make it through to the end you have been looking for. Every relationship, every event that's ever been planned, every business that's been started, every church that has begun has hit that moment where you think, "Is this going to end well for me?"

Some people hit those moments and they give up. Other people hit those moments and they seem to find another gear to kick into. The difference between the two is a simple, but profound word: hope. Our hope for the future, and the strength of that hope for the future is what fuels our work in the present. The way we look forward to a future end drives us to work diligently in the present, even in the face of tremendous obstacles that threaten to make our dreams die. And when we lose sight of the future fulfillment of those dreams we quickly lose motivation in the present. Nothing kills a dream quicker than the loss of hope. Human beings have an incredible capacity to endure opposition and pain as long as we have hope. But when we lose hope, we quickly collapse under even the slightest weight of struggle.

Fortunately, one of the key elements of following Jesus is the ability to look through the window of hope to frame out our worldview. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul writes about three

great qualities that “remain” in the life of a follower of Jesus – faith, hope, and love. It’s as if (shocking, I know) the Scriptures align with what we have experienced in our lives. We can’t live long, or very successfully, without hope for the future.

Just a couple chapters later, Paul writes the longest exposition on the subject of the resurrection that is found anywhere in the New Testament. It is one of the longest chapters in any of his letters covering a single issue. He begins the discussion of the resurrection with the critical point of the resurrection of Jesus, which we talked about last week on Easter.

This is the fundamental premise of the Christian faith and life: Jesus is alive. Verse 1 of chapter 15 says it as explicitly as possible. The gospel that Paul was preaching and in which the Corinthian believers had put their faith was founded on the cornerstone of the resurrection of Jesus. He died for our sins to fulfill the scriptures, was buried to fulfill the scriptures, and he rose again victorious over death to complete the work he was called to accomplish.

But there were some in that church who were denying the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. After all, it does seem like a rather extraordinary occurrence, doesn’t it? But as they were denying the resurrection of Jesus they were also in turn using that as an excuse to say that whatever they did with their bodies didn’t matter because their bodies were just going in the grave when they died. If your body is just worm food anyway, it doesn’t matter what you do with it here and now, they reasoned.

But Paul pushes back on this teaching, and pushes back really hard because the resurrection of Jesus is not only an object of faith, but an object of hope for us as well. This event is a historical reality with tremendous implications for the future as well – a future hope that is just as critical to following Jesus as is faith in the past event of his resurrection. Without the element of hope for a future resurrection, Paul claims, we don’t have a faith worth proclaiming at all; we just have another philosophical system. Verse 19 says it the best, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” The implication is clear. We have a hope that extends beyond this life in this world, but it is equally clear that we do have hope that sustains us in this life as well.

Paul’s declarations of the victory of Christ in and through his death and resurrection in this chapter are some of the most stirring, powerful, high and hopeful texts in the entire New Testament. He declares first the words we often repeat at funerals, when we stand at the transition point between this life and the next: death is swallowed up in victory. That alone is enough to make us look hopefully towards the future. But he also makes a critical transition from the future hope to the present challenge in verses 57-58. The challenge is directed towards the present but it is informed by the future hope.

Since we have this great hope and confidence in the resurrection – thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Christ! – our task now is to be strong, steadfast, immovable and abounding in God’s work wherever and whenever we find it needs to be done. The implication, of course, is that during the course of our doing God’s work for his kingdom in the present we will come up against those moments when we will lose sight of our future hope and the resurrection because we are facing difficulty and opposition right now. There will be times when we will wonder whether or not what we are doing for

God's Kingdom now will make much of a difference at all. In short, we will be tempted to lose hope, fall into despair and get tired of doing God's work because of the difficulty we face. But that is why hope is such an essential ingredient to following Jesus, and why it is such a powerful force. It strengthens our resolve in the present and gives energy to our work when we let hope rise in our hearts.

But it's not just the steadfast resolve we need. Hope births in us the opportunity to be overflowing and abundant in God's work when we give ourselves fully to it. There is a connection between the hope we experience in Christ and the quality of the work we do for him. Hope gives us permission to give ourselves fully to the work of God knowing that he deserves our best. Hope for the future pushes into the present and reminds us that God's Kingdom is coming but that Jesus' resurrection indicates that work has already begun in us and through us. There is nothing more hopeful than working for a king and a kingdom that will never fail, and there is uncommon joy in that work.

Hope gives us confidence that the work we do in the Lord (in his power, through his hope in us) will not be in vain. In hope those two worlds of this life and the life to come have been pushed together because Jesus is alive and his kingdom is coming. Everything you do now in Christ cannot be in vain because it is part of the great work of God's Kingdom coming and his will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

We work now in anticipation of what we hope for in the future – not just the resurrection of our bodies, but the fulfillment of God's kingdom coming to earth. And the joy of that coming will be made even sweeter by the work we have done now as we look forward to that great day in the future. The hope that fills us now will one day be realized in full and that gives us strength and energy to face the current opposition and challenges with steadfast resolve and abundant effort and fruit. One day we will see the whole thing unveiled and it will be even more beautiful and breathtaking for the labor that we do today in anticipation of that day.

Some of you are stuck in a place where you feel like you're without hope and are struggling to keep going, and the possibility is just hitting you this morning that it's the result of placing your hope in the wrong things. We've talked this morning about placing your hope in Jesus and his kingdom, but if you're honest you know that you have been placing your hope in something less permanent and lasting than that. You didn't know it at the time, but now you're experiencing what happens when you put your hope in those relationships, agendas, and purposes that aren't eternal. I want to encourage you to allow the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of his coming Kingdom to meet you here today and give you the ability to hope again, this time in a future that will give you joy now and then.

Others of you have been following Jesus for a period of time and you are finding that it has grown increasingly difficult to work for his Kingdom because you are losing hope due to the opposition you face, or the challenges you are experiencing. I hope that you will hear this as an encouragement to your hope today, that you will be reminded that the work you are doing for Jesus and his Kingdom, even if no one else notices, cannot be in vain. Let that hope you know is there motivate your work now.

Together we form a community of men and women committed to keeping hope alive – hope in the work of God’s eternal Kingdom. We will anticipate that kingdom with our work now, and inspired by hope, we will work tirelessly to see his Kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.