August 1, 2021

Rick Myatt

DON’T BE LIKE PORKY PIG

1 Peter 3:15-22

In 2004 10 year old Tilly Smith from England was with her family on the island of Phuket in Thailand on vacation. As she walked with her family on Mai Khao beach she noticed the ocean water receding, but not coming back in. Two weeks earlier she had a lesson in school about tsunamis, and recognized this as a sign of one. She told her parents this, but they dismissed it. At that point she began to get emotional, crying out, “There’s going to be a tsunami.” Her sister got scared and began to cry. Tilly’s dad took her back to the hotel to try to calm her down, but she was insistent. Finally her dad talked to a security guard and said, “I know this sounds crazy, but my daughter says there is going to be a tsunami.” Amazingly the guard listened. He sounded the warning and shouted at people to get off the beach. Pandemonium ensued, but many people took refuge in the lobby which was on an upper floor of the hotel. As you know, there was a tsunami. It took the lives of 230,000 people, but not one person on Mai Khao beach died, because they listened to Tilly.

You may not feel very eloquent or persuasive or authoritative, but as a follower of Jesus Christ you have some information that is more urgent and important than what Tilly Smith shared that day. It is what people most need to hear. Let’s think about that today as we look at 1 Peter 3:15-22.

This passage is notoriously difficult. Verses 19-20 have given rise to much debate and discussion among Bible scholars. When I was in seminary in a class on exegesis we had to do a paper on this passage because it presents such a challenge. There are several questions these verses raise and there are no clear, satisfactory answers to them. Martin Luther gave up trying to understand it. This entire section is kind of a rabbit trail. If you deleted the section following verse 18 and jumped from there to 4:1 it would make perfect sense.

There is not much to be gained from working through all the questions and the various possible interpretations that have been suggested, so I am going to just tell you what I think Peter was saying in these verses. He says after Jesus’ resurrection he made a proclamation to “imprisoned spirits” who had been disobedient long ago in the days of Noah. Wait, when did that happen? I don’t remember reading that in the story. When did that happen? This appears to be a reference to some ancient non-biblical Jewish writings that referred to angelic beings that had disobeyed God around Noah’s day. What Jesus proclaimed was his victory over them. The reason Peter brought this up was to encourage the ancient suffering Christians that Christ had suffered as they were suffering and worse, but was victorious. It means his followers would also have victory despite the suffering.

Another part of this passage that causes some heartburn is when Peter says in verse 21 that “baptism now saves you.” Wait, I thought we were saved by grace through faith, not by the act of being baptized. We are saved by grace. Peter clarifies that it is not the physical act of being baptized that matters, but “the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.” The New American Standard translation of that verse is better. It says, “baptism now saves you, not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience.” It is the appeal to God for forgiveness in Jesus Christ that baptism represents that is what matters. Trusting in Christ’s work for forgiveness of our guilt saves you by grace through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Hopefully now that we have dealt with that, at least to some degree, we can look at what this passage is actually about. This passage addresses our call to tell people about Jesus. Most of us feel like we are, at best, not very good when it comes to sharing our faith. We feel inadequate and kind of fearful about it. But this passage is good news for all of us.

Most of you remember Micah and Alycia Vandover, who served for a time as missionaries we supported. Both of them are amazing evangelists. They talk to everyone about Jesus. They told us about their experiences encountering people in coffee shops, on the beach, in their neighborhood and telling them the good news of Jesus Christ. It is inspiring to hear their stories of how lives were impacted. But most of us feel we can’t do what they do. We’re not that bold, we’re not that outgoing, we don’t come up with the right thing to say, we don’t even see the opportunity to say something. When we try, we drop the ball. I believe many of us have some fear about evangelism, but our fear is that we are actually going to do the reverse of what we want to do. We will mess up and turn people away from Jesus. God has given some people the ability to be evangelists, but not everyone. Yet he has given us all the mandate to declare his praise, to be light in the darkness. This verse gives us a model for carrying out the command to tell others about our God of grace that all of us can employ. You don’t have to be an extrovert nor a gifted evangelist. This is evangelism for the rest of us. It’s not hard, but it requires 3 things.

HOPE

Peter said people might ask about our hope. It is significant that Peter identified hope as the thing people would notice about a Christian. Wait, didn’t Jesus say that people will know that we are his disciples by our love? Isn’t that the distinguishing characteristic of his followers? Yes, it is. Jesus said that people will know we are his followers by the way we love one another. So, yes, to be sure, love is the mark of those who know Christ.

However, love may not necessarily be the first thing that catches the attention of non-believers. What they might first notice about a true Jesus follower is the hope he or she has. The reason for that is everyone is desperate for hope. We are all looking for it.

You can certainly understand how people might have been impressed by the hope of the people to whom Peter wrote. Many of those early believers were slaves, they were almost all poor. They were oppressed and persecuted. They were ostracized from their community. Imagine a follower of Jesus in that situation, with all that difficulty, still being peaceful, joyful, rejoicing, considering himself or herself blessed because they are full of hope. People would have noticed that. It would not be surprising if someone saw this and said, “What is it with you? How can you be so happy in your situation?” They’d love to have that kind of hope themselves. Where did it come from?

People are desperate for hope. Without hope they do not thrive, and they will not long even survive. Hope gives us the ability to keep going to persevere. Being hopeless usually means giving up. Laurie and I have been to 2 Padre games this last month. In the first one the Padres pitching blew up and they were down 8-0 after 3 innings. The second one, the Padre pitching blew up and they were down 9-0 after 4 innings. The first one we stayed until almost the end of the game. The second one we left after 5 innings. What was the difference? In the bottom of the 4th inning of the first game the Padres scored 6 runs, sparked by an improbable, historic grand slam home run hit by relief pitcher Daniel Camarena. There was hope they could actually win that game, and they did. In the second game the sparkplug of that team, their best player, Fernando Tatis, was injured in the first inning and left the game, and the whole team went flat. We could see there was no hope they would win that game, and they didn’t. With hope, you hang in there. When you have no hope, you give up. Hope made all the difference.

What is the hope that we have that people are looking for? It is a large hope that has several aspects. When we think about hope most of the time our hope is focused on something in this life. We hope for some good thing. I’ve been having a mighty struggle with allergy and sinus problems the last few weeks. I have an appointment with my otolaryngologist a week from tomorrow. I hope that she will be able to treat me and give me some relief. I hope everybody in my family stays healthy. I hope when it comes time for me to retire we will have enough money to live on. I hope this latest threat of the COVID variant doesn’t return us to the darkest days of 2020. Really, life is an unending stream of hopes. Hopes are what keep us going. Without hope, we die.

There is nothing wrong with those hopes. They are natural. But we tend to base our whole outlook in life on hopes that cannot sustain our lives. Life giving hope is not one of those things of this world that we usually focus on. Peter wrote in 1:3, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” We have been given a whole new life in a living, real, dynamic hope. What is that hope?

Galatians 5:5 in the English Standard Version says, “Through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” People usually don’t think the thing they most hope for is righteousness. However, though they often don’t know it, every human desperately longs for righteousness. We hope for it every day of our lives. We mostly don’t know that it is righteousness that we are hoping for because we don’t recognize what righteousness really is.

A short definition of righteousness is that it means to be declared to be right. It is a stamp of approval. If you buy some meat you always want to know that it has the USDA seal of approval. It has been judged to be right, meaning it is not going to make you sick. It is righteous meat. All human beings long to be given a seal of approval. What that really is, is a desperate desire for righteousness. Why do we want people to think well of us? Why do we try so hard to explain ourselves when misunderstood and defend ourselves when unfairly accused or blamed? Why do we have an insatiable desire for affirmation and approval? It is because we are longing for righteousness.

Laurie reminded me this week of one of those classic moments in our marriage. It occurred quite a few years ago when we went to the airport to pick up our niece. Her flight was delayed, so we sat on a bench in one of the concourses at Terminal One to wait as hundreds of people walked by on their way to and from flights. At one point I had to use the men’s room. On the way back to the bench something on the floor caught my eye. When I sat down I told Laurie about it. I said, “This is strange, but somehow some lady apparently dropped a pair of her underwear on the floor over there. Must have fallen out of a bag or something.” I pointed it out and Laurie started laughing. I said, “I know that’s odd, but why do you think it’s so funny?” She said, “I think that’s my underwear.” I was dumbfounded at this revelation. I said, “How is that possible?” Laurie has some interesting quirks. She often takes shoes with laces off without untying them. For her they are slipoffs. She also sometimes takes off her underwear and her pants all at the same time. Apparently she had done that with the pants she was wearing, the underwear had stayed in them, and unbeknown to her had remained there until they dropped out of the pants when she was walking in the airport. She said to me, “Go pick them up.” I said, “I’m not going to pick up and carry around women’s underwear. You dropped them. You go get them.” Very chivalrous. But I didn’t want people looking at me and thinking, “Look at that weird dude. He has a thing about ladies underwear.” Why care about what people will think? Especially when they probably aren’t paying any attention at all. Because it’s what we do. It’s human. That’s because we want righteousness. We want to be approved. You’ll notice Laurie didn’t walk right out there and pick up her own article of intimate apparel. She wanted her husband to do it. That’s because she wants to be righteous. Embarrassment always traces its roots back to our need for righteousness.

We never get over wanting approval, being embarrassed when we think we look bad, fearing what people think. Our desire for approval is insatiable because what we need is God’s seal of approval. We need him to say that we are accepted and that he loves us and approves of us. That’s righteousness. It is being declared right in God’s eyes. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul said, “For our sake, he (God the Father) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words, in Christ we have God’s righteousness, his seal of approval, not because of what we are, but because of what Jesus did for us.

In Galatians 5:5 Paul said we wait eagerly for the hope of righteousness. Don’t we have righteousness even now in Christ? Yes, we do. But we wait eagerly because we are anxious for the moment when we actually see it and hear it proclaimed by God. If you trust in Jesus Christ you are righteous before God, but you still await the day when you will stand before God and hear him say that. That day and ever after you will have the righteousness issue settled forever in your heart because you will experience God setting his stamp of approval on you. That is the time we are eagerly awaiting.

Right now, in Christ, you are righteous before God. You have been forgiven and reconciled to him, connected to him. He approves of you, as you are, he loves you, as you are. He accepts you and rejoices over you, as you are. But sometimes we struggle to believe it. We forget it. So we eagerly await the day when we no longer struggle with it because it will be beyond doubt. That is the heart of the hope that we have.

That hope touches on several other aspects of life. For instance, all of us hope that we are acceptable human beings, that we are loved, that our lives are worthwhile and that they mean something. We hope for those things, but we aren’t sure of them, and most of us struggle because we kind of doubt that they are true of us. Am I a worthwhile person? Can God really approve of me? Does my life really mean something? Many of us struggle with these questions. In Christ, our hope is that God answers all of them yes. You are a worthwhile person, God does approve of you and love you, your life has more significance than you can even imagine. That’s our hope.

There’s more. There are so many random and difficult things that happen to us. Honestly, much of the time life looks chaotic and random doesn’t it? There are lots of hardships along the way. Laurie and I have both lost a parent, we experienced the death of a child, we have a granddaughter who has two serious and potentially life impacting medical problems. We’ve been stabbed in the back by friends and just abandoned by others. Over the years we went through times of great financial stress.

The hope we have is that God is with us. Psalm 3:3 says, “You, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the one who lifts my head high.” Verse 5 says, “I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.” We can rest, because God is with us. Having hope in Christ means that God is with us and he will sustain us. He is there to redeem everything that happens to us. None of it is an accident and none of it is meaningless. The New American Standard translation of Ephesians 1:10 says God is summing up all things in Christ. It all is going somewhere. This means we have the hope that everything that happens to us has a point, that God will use all of it for our good, and that he will be with us to sustain us and strengthen us so we can get through it. There is always hope!

Contrast that hope with the characteristics of the things we hope for in this life. First, there is something wrong with everything in this world. There is no perfect here. The thing you hope for may be nice, but it won’t be perfect. For instance, there’s something wrong with even the best places on earth. For Laurie and me, paradise is a tropical island with warm ocean waters and beautiful beaches. But do you know what comes with that? Be careful of the sun, or you’ll get a scorching sun burn. That lovely warm ocean water contains jelly fish. An encounter with one of them is the farthest thing from paradise. Oh, and sharks. An encounter with one of them can ruin your whole day. So far in Hawaii this year there have been 6 shark attacks, almost one a month. One of them took place in 3 feet of water! And by the way, if you happen to get a cut in that tropical water, it is highly likely that cut will get infected. And coral is nothing to mess around with. Oh, and all that nice tropical vegetation that is so lovely, is likely to harbor mosquitoes and yes, everybody’s favorite, cockroaches. Sounds like a nightmare, right? And everywhere on the planet has stuff like that. Nothing here is really perfect.

A second aspect of the things we hope for in this world is that nothing lasts here. There is a saying, “All good things must come to an end.” It’s true. Nothing good lasts. Why is that? What is the law that says it has to be that way? Have you ever bought a new car and been excited about it? It works beautifully, it looks terrific and it has all kinds of bells and whistles. A mere 6 or 7 years later you are not so wowed by it. It’s just a car. It has picked up a few knicks and dents. It maybe has a little annoying problem. It doesn’t have new car smell. Pretty soon you just want to get something new.

Finally, there’s the reality that generally things tend to be kind of anti-climactic. The classic illustration of this is in sports. A team wins the Super Bowl. They achieved a lofty goal, a dream, and it is spectacular. It is the pinnacle, the most hoped for achievement. There is a huge celebration, the city has a parade. But soon, life returns to normal. Nothing really has changed. Next season will start and last season’s win is mostly forgotten. Who won the Super Bowl 3 years ago? You know I’m a big sports fan, but I can’t even remember. Probably New England, right? You’re just guessing. It’s like a week after Christmas when you were a kid. The new toys were nice, but now it’s over and the toys are just toys.

What all of this tells us is that if our hopes are for something in this world, we are inevitably going to end up disappointed and disillusioned. It won’t be perfect, it won’t last, there will be a letdown. Our hope needs to be for something that exceeds our dreams, that is unalloyed joy, and that never ends. That something is not of this world. That is the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. Peter said in 1 Peter 1:4-5 that the living hope we have in Christ includes an “inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” It is permanent, it doesn’t fade. Nothing can spoil it, it’s perfect. And according to verse 5 it is “shielded by God’s power.”

When Peter refers to our hope, this is what he means. We have been declared righteous by God through Jesus Christ, so we are loved, accepted, we have lives that are eternally significant. God is with us, so there is hope that life is going somewhere and God is using everything that happens to us, and that in the end we have the best hope of all, the hope of eternal life.

If anyone is to ever ask about that hope, we are going to have to live in the reality of it. They will have to see it in us. It is going to have to make us noticeably different from people without hope. We are going to have to exhibit the peace and joy that come from having this hope in every circumstance in our life. It will be particularly noticeable when our circumstances give no cause for peace or joy and we have those things anyway. They’re not going to see it if its not there. You are not ever going to hear anyone wax eloquent about my amazing singing ability. That’s because I don’t have any. And people won’t ask about our hope if the only hope we have is the same that they have, one that cannot last, cannot sustain them, cannot fill them with peace and joy.

A REASON

A second thing that needs to be true is we need to answer when people ask us about our hope. We don’t have to preach to them. We don’t have to back up our semi tractor trailer rig full of apologetics and dump the whole load on them. But we do need to be able to explain just what our hope is and why we have this hope, in a cogent way. We need to be able simply and clearly explain where the hope comes from, and we need to at least be ready to give a reason for it.

Laurie and I have had an experience on multiple occasions that reminds me of this. We have been repeatedly asked when people hear that we’ve been married almost 42 years what our secret is because we seem to love each other so much and are so happy. The truth is, the secret is just be married to Laurie, because she is such an amazing woman, and because with her life is always an adventure where you never know what is going to happen. However, that’s not a very helpful answer for people because there’s only one Laurie, and she’s taken. The first time someone asked what our secret to our joyful marriage was, apart from saying it was to marry Laurie, I didn’t have a very coherent response. But after that I thought through that question, and now have a better way to respond to the question. The thing we don’t want to do if someone asks about our hope, is stumble around, babbling and sounding like Porky Pig, “be duh, be duh, be duh, that’s all folks.”

Most of us have had the experience at one time or another of a question coming up about our faith and we end up sounding like Porky Pig. It feels bad to completely fumble the opportunity to actually say something coherent about what we believe. Porky Pig is fine in a cartoon, but I would rather people not think anyone who believes in Jesus is pretty much like him. If we live in the reality of our hope it is going to make a difference in us. People might ask, “Why are you always so positive, why are you so hopeful?” We need to have an answer that is more articulate than, “be duh, be duh, be duh, that’s all folks.”

That’s something that we should be able to do in a very few sentences. If someone asked you why you seem to be at peace, why you seem to be joyful and positive when most people would be complaining, grumpy and upset, why you are hopeful, could you give them an answer? We should be able to answer in a short sentence or two these three questions: What makes you as hopeful as you are? How does this hope help you? Why do you believe in this hope?

I suggest that you take some time at and actually write out the way you would answer those questions, and maybe even rehearse it. If you don’t, you may well end up doing a Porky Pig imitation. Have it clear in your mind so it can come out easily. Here is what I would say. I have hope because God has forgiven me, loves me, accepts me and values me because of what his Son Jesus Christ did on my behalf. Because of this I know that I have eternal life in heaven. This helps me because I know that God is always with me, that he will work out good for me in every situation, that my life has great meaning and value, and that I have nothing to fear, even in death. I believe this because I know that in real life history Jesus Christ died for me, but then conquered death, thus proving that he was who he claimed to be, God in human form.

You need to write your own script, and then know it well enough that when asked you can dredge it up, instead of saying, “that’s all folks.”

GENTLENESS

One last reminder, though, as we answer people we must always do so gently. Dave Roseberry, who is a pastor, relates something that happened to him that speaks to this matter. His shoulder had become very painful, so he went to see his doctor. The doctor told him he had a frozen shoulder, a result of age and use. The doc prescribed physical therapy and a cortisone shot in the shoulder. As he was preparing the injection the doc asked Roseberry what he did for a living. He answered, “I’m a pastor. I preach for a living. Do you go to a church?” The doctor said, “No, I gave that up a long time ago. Now just relax and we’ll get the shoulder loosened up so you can continue to point your finger at people.”

Obviously that doctor’s experience with pastors and quite likely with other religious people is they do a lot of finger pointing. Mostly all that does is drive people away. God says being gentle is an important quality. Galatians 5:22-23 list it as one of the fruit of the Spirit, so if we are walking in the Spirit it will be characteristic of us. Philippians 4:5 says, “Let your gentleness be evident to all.” James 3:17 in the New American Standard translation says, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits.” We should not seek to combat people, or be blaming, arguing, defensive. We should be peace loving, gentle and reasonable.

In Matthew 11:29 Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” If we seek to be like Jesus, we will be gentle and humble, and people will find it restful to be in our presence, not agitating.

To be gentle means to care for another person, to do all one can to not hurt, but to help, to be soothing. It’s like when you are going to take a bandaid off of a child, for instance. You try to do it as painlessly as possible because you care for the child. Gentle certainly does not mean weak. Jesus called himself gentle and he was the strongest person who has ever lived.

One of the greatest coaches of all time, the late John Wooden, learned gentleness from watching his dad. Wooden said, “it takes great strength on the inside to be gentle on the outside.” What makes us able to be gentle with other people is strength that comes from confidence in what we believe. If we are confident in the good news of Christ, we will be at peace if someone disagrees with us. We will not be threatened or offended by that, because we know what we believe is true.

If someone chooses not to believe in the hope that I have I don’t need to get upset or defensive or argumentative, because I know the truth. Strength and confidence give gentleness.

Here’s the thing: without the Spirit of Christ working in them people are spiritually dead. It takes a miracle of God’s work to make them come alive. You and I cannot do it. There is nothing you can do or say to make a spiritually dead person alive. So we can humbly, lovingly, gently, respectfully share about the hope that we have, and let God work in that person’s life. It is not up to us to change them or convince them. We can’t! But we can tell them about our hope. But that starts with us living in the profound, life changing reality of that living hope in Christ.

Yesterday was the date that 24 years ago my father’s life on this planet came to an end. I remember vividly the day that the doctor sadly delivered the news that the chemo treatments that Dad was enduring were not working and that there was nothing more that could be done. It was gut-wrenching, devastating news. Dad’s reaction was amazing. He looked at Mom and calmly said, “Nothing has changed.” Dad had hope. He was rock solid confident in Jesus Christ, and he knew that he would soon be going to see him and, as Jesus promised, live again forever. In the remaining weeks of his life as he neared that day he was at peace, always full of hope. And it was noticed. People could see the hope that he had, and it had a big effect on them. We have tremendous hope at every moment of life because Jesus has won the victory for us and he is with us. He will never leave us. If we will live in the reality of those truths and rejoice in that hope every day, it will be noticed. Let’s do that, and let’s prepare to have a better explanation than Porky Pig.