

“The Recovery of Hope”

Psalm 33:13-22; Romans 5:1-5

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 10, 2016 – 3rd Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

People are motivated by all kinds of things in life. For one man his dream also became his quest. His pursuit took him all the way across the Atlantic Ocean when that was a very perilous voyage.

There aren't many people whose name is remembered 500 years later, but this person is one of them. Strange, too, because he never discovered what he set out to find. This man was Juan Ponce de Leon, and of course what he was looking for was a fabled fountain of youth said to exist in the New World. He spent considerable time in his search, but to no avail.

In some ways it makes you wonder why the story of one man's adventure has been so lasting. There's nothing to even show for all his efforts; yet, most of us both recognize his name and his elusive goal. Other people left a far greater legacy, but their names are hardly recalled. Why Ponce de Leon?

Perhaps it is because what he hoped to find is something all of us would also like to discover. In fact, some would say that this pursuit is a major preoccupation of people even today, and especially in America. If we can't find a magic fountain in actuality, we'll spend millions on items which make us think we've discovered it.

Hair coloring, tanning salons, skin creams are all ways we simulate a youthful appearance, even though probably none of these do any actual good in slowing down aging. I guess when you want something bad enough, you spend whatever it takes to come as close as you can to the real thing. We can laugh at Ponce de Leon, but I think he could laugh at us as well.

Charles Revlon once said, "We don't sell cosmetics; we sell hope." And when you come right down to it, that's where a lot of our money goes: buying hope for something better.

Today a lot of folks try to meet someone online, and some have actually been successful. While I don't personally have need of this, I put "dating websites" in my computer browser just to see what would show up. I found it's a little more complicated than expected because it brought up a whole list of subcategories.

There were sites for adults (well I'd hope so), but also ones for African Americans, for seniors, for single parents, for police officers, for farmers, for big people, for shy persons, and (my favorite) for attracting millionaires. Perhaps you could say they aren't really marketing an internet service. They are marketing hope, pure and simple.

Now I don't want to make it seem like I'm putting down cosmetics or dating sites, but it's important to see them for what they are. They both build on aspirations, a sense of longing and hope, which runs deep within the character of us all.

Another person who talked about hope was the Apostle Paul, but in a somewhat different sense. In his letter to the church in Rome he says, "Since we are justified by faith, we have

peace with God through Christ, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. Further, we boast in our sufferings, for suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and this kind of hope does not disappoint us."

"Hope that doesn't disappoint." We all know the hopes that promise a lot, but fail to deliver. We've had our share, from new cars to new investments. We want everything to work out so much that we start to build our future upon these hopes. So that, should the dream be shattered, we have a hard time recovering. When things don't work out, we feel disillusioned and maybe even despondent.

Jobs can be a lot like that. We get excited when we have a new opportunity, but only time will tell whether this will be the right place for us. A move to another part of town, or even a different area of the country, can also end up letting us down. And who hasn't tried to lose weight and found the scale never seems to budge?

Yes, we've all had experience with hope and we've also had our shattered dreams. So how is it that Paul can talk so optimistically about this hope to which he refers? Why should it be any different than any other?

Consider this: much of hope is simply wishful thinking. You'd like it to happen, you want it to happen, you'd enjoy it if it did happen, but you can end up building this hope on the flimsiest of evidence. There is often nothing to support it.

Contrast this kind of hope with that which is built on actual expectations. This kind of hope is honest because it isn't predicated only on desire, but on the evidence. There is high likelihood that it will come to pass because everything points to it. This is the kind of hope that Paul write about.

This kind of thinking is also evident in our reading today from the Psalms. "A king is not saved by his army, nor a warrior delivered by his strength. Instead, our trust is in the Lord, for the Lord is our help and protection. Our hearts rejoice in God because we are confident in him. May you love be upon us, O Lord, may it be our firm foundation, for we place our hope in you."

In this psalm God is praised not for what is given, but for the very nature of the Lord. This saving love so intrinsic, so much a part of God, that it cannot be thought of as separate. It is a defining characteristic.

And so, the psalmist rightly says, "We place our hope in you." In Romans Paul states, "Our hope does not disappoint us...." Both point to the same understanding though they do it in different ways. They both use the word "hope" and do so with total confidence. This is not wishful thinking, but it is an honest appraisal of what is known about God and God's love for us. There is no better place to put one's trust.

Even though when we are rightly people of hope—assured by God's love for us—it doesn't promise that life will necessarily be easy as a result. This wasn't Paul's experience, and for most of us, it isn't our experience either.

One of the world's most enduring authors is Fyodor Dostoevsky. Few have surpassed him in terms of his ability to see inside the human soul. In his lifetime he was often criticized for the somber mood which runs through his novels. Yet, in story after story, we meet characters who resist being defeated by circumstance. Dostoevsky tells of people who persevere to the end even when others would give up in the same situation.

His stories have endured the passage of time because they are so true to life. They're all the more credible because the triumphs they describe are rarely total. One never fully subdues his fears, but somehow learns to be less terrified by them. One never fully overcomes her loneliness, but learns how to make it less pervasive. Not every illness can be fully conquered, but there are ways of fighting back that bring the bearer moments of quiet calm and a wider understanding of life.

Dostoevsky should have known. His epilepsy sometimes inserted itself just at those very times when he needed all of his creative and physical powers. Knowing his affliction might hit at any moment, he carried this dreadful weight with him constantly. Yet, it was his illness which made him so sensitive. He became acutely aware even of life's little possibilities, of simple things that the average person might tend to overlook.

Paul, too, speaks of an affliction he has, his "thorn in the side." We don't know what that was, but he is never free from it. We get the feeling that it's something that could have defeated him, but instead he turned it around to use to his advantage. Hear again today's scripture: "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has come into our hearts...."

Suffering, by itself, does not bring us any closer to God. In isolation there is nothing positive about it. But when we learn to live with our suffering it can give us a certain "hardness" in much the same way steel is tempered by heat. We learn we can endure, that we do not have to be defeated by setback and pain, and become stronger because our weakness can't defeat us.

Endurance, Paul says, brings character, a sense of knowing ourselves and being aware of our relationship to others. A person of character is one who is also more open to a relationship with God, mindful of where personal abilities end, and where God's attributes begin. In God one finds the real and true source of hope in life.

Life is not easy and no one ever promised us it would be. It is understandable that we might become discouraged and downcast. Yet, in the very midst of our despair, God often comes to us and reminds us that we are remembered and loved and valued. We can endure because we have a strength available to us that is beyond our own.

This is hope based not on wishful thinking, but true hope built on promise. This hope takes us through the troubles of today and carries us with confidence into whatever tomorrow has in store. On this hope we can build our lives.