

Hope is a good thing. In a book by John Ortberg called If You Want to Walk on the Water You've Got to Get Out of the Boat, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 159), the author discusses medical research that studied men after they had had their first heart attack. It was based on the degree of hopefulness or pessimism. Twenty-one of the twenty-five most pessimistic men died within eight years. Only six of the most optimistic died in the same time period. Hope was a better predictor of death than such medical risk factors as high blood pressure and cholesterol level.

Mr. Ortberg adds a humorous twist to make the point that hope is good: "Better to eat Twinkies in hope than to eat broccoli in despair" (159).

What is hope? Hope is when you're struggling, strained, or completely stressed out but you believe something better will happen. Hope is the expectation that something good will happen, something you haven't seen or have happen yet. Hope is when you're holding out for a future that is rosier than what you are going through now.

Whenever we hear about nations at odds with each other like Russia vs. Ukraine or China vs. Taiwan or hear of terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, we hope that peace will come to this battered world. We watch world leaders meet and hope that something good will happen for a change. We learn of a major terrorist arrested and we hope that the violence will be slowed down. Hope is good when you want bloodshed to stop.

When we turn to the news and our eyes are met with stories of car jackings and shootings, we hope that people are not seriously hurt or dead. When you hear the siren of the ambulance or fire truck go by or look up outside to see a helicopter coming in for a landing at the hospital, you may say a silent prayer and hope that whoever is in trouble will make it through okay; that those rescue workers are successful in their work. Hope is good when you're concerned about keeping people safe and out of danger.

Yes, hope is good, but deep inside we know that hopes die all too soon when the future is uncertain or what we hope for will only be temporary. Sometimes the stories on the news about fires and accidents

don't end happily. Sometimes the patient on the way to hospital doesn't make it.

Good hopes disappear when evil wins out over peace, when death takes innocent lives. Deep inside we know that the next disaster is soon to happen. A tornado, a plane crash, flood, building collapse, earthquake- something will be the next breaking news story. Our good hopes for safety die just a bit more each day with each new catastrophe.

Don't get me wrong. Hope is **good** and we are not to give up hoping for health, safety, peace, and a better future. Those are **good** hopes. But they are also **dying** hopes because they are uncertain or will not last.

It's not hard to make a list of words that begin with the letter "D" that describe how these good hopes are dying hopes. Discouragement, despair, disease, disaster, devil, disappointment, disobedience, depression, distance from God, detractors, and death. The last one is literally the killer of hope- death.

I'm not sure why, but so many cemeteries seem to be built on a hill, exposed to the harshest weather conditions. In the heat of summer, with the grass turned brown, or the dead of winter, with an icy wind blowing down your neck, you stand in the middle of a sea of gravestones, and deep inside you know hopes for health and safety and something good died when the caskets were lowered into the ground. Yes, good hopes die.

And yet, even when these good hopes die, we know there is a better hope that still lives. Against all dying hopes, we have one hope that lives deep inside of us. You can hear it in the apostle Peter's words. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." "Greatly rejoice." "An inexpressible and glorious joy." "Praise and honor." "New birth." "An inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade." These first verses of Peter's letter shout hope-living hope- as he encourages his readers with the reason for the better hope that lives. God has given us new birth into a living hope through resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the One who conquered sin, death, and the devil for us!

What is this better hope and what does it look like? Hope is when you're struggling, and you believe something better will happen because Jesus will never leave you nor forsake you. He lives and guards the

salvation that has been given to you. Hope is the expectation that something good will happen, something we have not seen or had happen yet. No, we have not seen heaven yet. We have not experienced life after death. We have not had the last day resurrection from the dead that will empty all the cemeteries in the world. But that inheritance is kept in heaven for us. Hope is when you are holding out for a future that is rosier than what you are going through now. Even when good hopes die, we have deep within us a better hope, the hope of the resurrected Lord Jesus who lives for us, who lives within us, who lives to give us the hope of the life, peace, and safety with Him that will never fade or die or disappear.

My maternal grandparents are buried in a steep hillside cemetery in the scenic mountains of northern Idaho. Many of the graves in that cemetery, including my grandparents and other relatives, are so far up a steep embankment that some mourners cannot make the walk up the hill. The last time I visited my grandparents' graves, I remember that it was an absolutely beautiful summer day up in those awesome tree-covered mountains. Another thing I remember is that the grass was dry. The crinkly carpet of brown blades of grass reminded me that death surrounded me. But then I look down and see that flowers have been placed on their graves. The color and beauty of the flowers remind me that hope lives even in a cemetery.

You see, flowers at a cemetery can serve to take us back to the message of Easter and all the flowers that fill a church on that joyous day of celebration. Thankfully, we still have some here today. These flowers can take us back to the first Easter morning when Jesus' tomb is empty. Try to picture in your mind Mary Magdalene, whose hopes were dashed by Jesus' death on the cross, now holding on tightly to her risen Lord. Her hopes are alive again. Deep inside she knows that even though death may kill some good hopes, she has her arms around the better hope, the eternal hope, and the hope for salvation that cannot be taken from her no matter what "D" word may invade her life.

And this same hope lives within us when we bury a parent, a spouse, a child, or a close friend. (pause) In the service at the graveside, we read this paragraph: "We now commit the body of (you fill in the name) to its

resting place; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain **hope** of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subdue all things to Himself (Pastoral Care Companion, CPH, 2007, 134.)

Because Jesus lives, our hope lives. And you know what? The living hope makes even the dying hopes good. We hope for health because we believe that God's healing touch reaches into our lives today to give temporary reprieve from the disease and despair that invade our bodies. We hope for peace because we believe God works times of quiet and protection as a little bit of relief from the destruction and death of this violent world. We hope for safety because we believe God sends His guardian angels to defend us from so many times of disaster.

Yes, hope is good, but even when good hopes die, we have been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen.