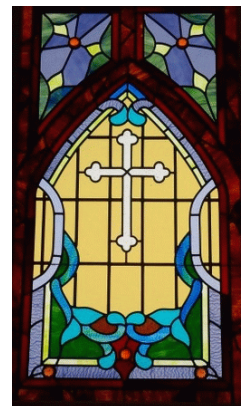


Romans 5:1-5 John 16:12-15

“Never disappointed”



Fred Craddock tells a story from Depression days. It was in the rural Southern United States. A father is walking along the side of his house, more like a shack really, and he hears his two daughters on the back porch. They're laughing loudly, shrieking with joy and glee. He decides to investigate. On the old back porch on the old wooden steps are his two daughters looking through a Sears Roebuck Catalogue. They're looking at all the beautiful clothes, all the bright colours. And they are laughing. So, the father comes up them and yanks the book away from them. "Don't you ever let me see you with this book again." As he cuffs them lightly on the leg, they run past him, into the house, trying to stifle their sobs. The father then sits down on the back porch, buries his head in his hands, and cries like a baby.

Craddock asks, now, why did the father do that? Was it because he wasn't a good father? Was it because he was heartless or cruel? Or perhaps there was another explanation. Maybe he acted this way, was only doing what he thought was best for his daughters. Perhaps the father had drunk the bitter dregs of disappointment too often. Perhaps he didn't want to stir false hopes, ill-fated dreams, and expectations in the hearts of his loved ones. Possibly he felt it would be cruel to allow them to have illusions about the beautiful clothes for which they would have no realistic hope ever to own. Hope makes one too vulnerable. Perhaps it's better not to hope at all than to hope and to know crushing disappointment.

We've all been there, haven't we? Many of our parents, who learned the hard way, taught us lines like: "don't get your hopes up too high," and "don't count your chickens before they're hatched." In our own lives, we've learned that friends sometimes let us down; marriages sometimes fail; some clouds don't seem to have any silver lining, and even if they do, they're still clouds; dreams don't always come true; advertisements don't always live up to their hype; jobs can be lost; some diseases have no cure; and the philosophy that fuels the lottery and gaming industry that "you have to win sometime" is riddled with holes and, at best, offers disillusionment to most.

Little wonder, many people, like the father in Craddock's story, have determined that it's just better not to hope at all.

However, in Romans 5:5 Paul says, "and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." And when Paul talks about hope, about real hope, he's not expressing some kind of denial of life circumstances, so that we can express a false hope. As Gary Carver puts it in his sermon, "A Soul Afraid of Dying", "Real hope does not deny present circumstances but looks life squarely in the eye. Real hope is not stoic endurance but a motivation to active participation to bring about that for which we hope. Real hope is not a last resort but intentional planning for the future. Real hope is not by and by pie-in-the-sky but here and now. Real hope is not illusory but based on firsthand experience. Real hope is not a way out but a way through. Real hope connects the

present to the future and is based on the experience of what God has done in the past.”¹

The Hebrew word for ‘hope’ is ‘gawah’ which means to ‘twist or twine.’ Biblical hope,” Carver says, “real hope allows us to weave together all the circumstances of our existence into a strong cord upon which we can depend and onto which we can hold. ... real hope is not a way out but a way through. ... Real hope is a combination of and balance between God’s faithfulness and ours. We do what we can do and God does what he does. ... real hope is a wonderful balance between God’s strength and our cooperation with him.”²

Someone once asked Elton Trueblood, “What is the most important word in the Bible?” Trueblood, a great theologian and scholar responded, “The most important word in the Bible is ‘and.’ Because with God there is always more and the best is yet to be.”

Henry Jowett, on his deathbed, wrote a note to his friend, which said, “Just remember that Jesus is greater than anything we have ever said about him.”

At the time when Paul wrote this letter to Romans, he was spending the winter in Corinth, at the end of his third mission journey. While there, Paul was gathering an offering for the poor to bring to Jerusalem for distribution. It was his plan and hope that soon after visiting Jerusalem he would make a trip to Rome. His intention was to spend time with friends in Rome (whom he had met in a variety of places during his journeys). While there he would also attempt to explain his teachings to the Roman church. He was concerned about this congregation because they had become somewhat divided in their reactions to him. Then he would give them the opportunity to send him off with prayers and financial assistance in his next mission journey to Spain. However, Paul’s hopes were changed rather dramatically when he was arrested in Jerusalem, kept in prison for several years by cowardly politicians, shipwrecked on the long anticipated voyage to Rome, and eventually brought to Rome as a prisoner.

In the face of all this, Paul still firmly believed, was absolutely convinced and put it into writing, that “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” [Romans 5:5]

A story ... of hope, in God, who never lets us down, never disappoints us ...

Herman Battle, was an eloquent preacher who served an African-American congregation in the First Baptist Church on Eighth Street, Chattanooga for over 40 years. Dr. Battle was a cherished friend whose prayers brought the listener to the very foot of the cross. One year, in the community-wide Good Friday service, he told the story of the “homegoing” of his beloved wife. For 34 years they shared as close a relationship as any two people could and he was at her side for weeks during the last stages of her illness. On the day death crept closer, she turned to her husband and said, “Oh, Herman, do you see them?” He replied, “No, honey, I don’t! See what? I don’t see them.”

“Oh, Herman,” she said. “Don’t you see them? Don’t you see the lights?” “No, honey, I don’t. I don’t see the lights. I wish I could, but I don’t see the lights!”

Then, he said, gathering up all the energy she could, his wife said, “You will!”

Mrs. Battle, the apostle Paul, and I pray, you and I know a hope that will never disappoint us – not now, and not in the world to come.

¹ Gary L. Carver, “The Soul Afraid Of Dying” from the book Sermons On The Second Readings Series I, Cycle C, by

² Ibid