

## **Dependence: Made Right**

Romans 5:1-5

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Four weeks from today you are invited to join in worship with three other Presbyterian Churches at Romare Bearden Park (just two blocks away). We will gather in the dark at 6:30 am for an Easter Sunrise service. At some point in our worship, one of the pastors will ask the congregation who is gathered to turn toward the east and fall silent as night gives way to daybreak. We will break the silence with these familiar words: "Behold, Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed."

A little while later – in this room – we will gather once more for worship. It will probably be a little more crowded than it is today. Many a child will be wearing smocked clothes. The brass will sound. And we will sing, "Jesus Christ is risen today..."

So let me ask you: How will you hear that Easter announcement?  
What emotion will the good news of resurrection conjure up in you?  
Gratitude? Skepticism? Wonder? Apathy?

On Easter we celebrate what we believe to be the most important moment in the history of the world. The empty tomb is evidence for us of God's ultimate victory over the powers of sin and brokenness and death. Easter is an event that defies logic and expands possibility in ways that none other than God can do.

And so in these weeks that lead up to Easter Sunday we are spending time in preparation in order that this announcement of resurrection won't catch us flat-footed; so that Easter story we all know might continue to startle us with its beauty and its truth. In our preparation, we are focusing on passages in scripture that remind us of how much we need God's gift of resurrection – so that we don't fall into the trap of believing that our life is only what we make of it.

Today's reading is from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Beginning at the first verse of the fifth chapter, listen with me for the word of God...

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Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but 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 been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

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The first time I stood in a hospital room to visit someone who was battling a terminal disease, I was 24 years old and scared to death. In the eyes of the person lying in the hospital bed hooked up to IVs with their family huddled around them I was a chaplain...someone who was supposed to speak confidently about God's promises and about God's hope. In reality I was a seminary intern...someone who wrestled every day with God's promises and was still learning how to trust them.

Standing by the hospital bed, I remember feeling paralyzed about what I should say. The eyes of the patient and the patient's family were firmly fixed upon me. They were hungry for a word of comfort, for a word of grace. Instead, they received what I am sure sounded like hollow platitudes...words that were wrapped in the language of faith but void of any conviction. My visit was short – I stammered through a prayer – and couldn't wait to exit the room and escape back to a place where I felt more in control of my life.

At first blush the words that Paul speaks to us in today's passage sound like platitudes that you might find on the inside of a Hallmark Card.

Suffering produces endurance,  
Endurance produces character,  
Character produces hope,  
Hope does not disappoint.

And, to be honest, sometimes these words are misused. They become the things we say when we don't know what to say. They are the noise we make to cover our fear.

This week my sister reminded me of a scene from the British TV series, "Downton Abbey." In this particular episode one of the characters, Lady Edith Crawley, is jilted at the altar on her wedding day. Devastated, she runs from the church and to her room, throws herself onto her bed in her wedding gown and weeps. Her mother, Cora, comes to comfort her daughter, filling a space that needed silence with speech: "You are being tested, dear. And being tested only makes you stronger." Lady Edith replies, "I don't think it is working on me."<sup>1</sup>

My guess is that there are plenty of people in this room for whom Lady Edith's words ring true. People who have experienced the pit of suffering only to hear...

*God doesn't give you more than you can handle...  
Sometimes it is so hard to understand God's will...*

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin and her paper on this text (The Well, 2013, Baltimore).

*God must be teaching you a lesson...*  
I don't think it is working on me.

What I think people mean when they say these kind of things is, really: "I don't know how to make sense out of your pain and your suffering, but I love you and I wish I could take the pain away."

So what did Paul mean with these words that he said?

A friend of mine who wrote on this passage gives us a clue. Paul is writing to a church community that he has never met – and the message that he is trying to communicate is not that he understands the experience of people who suffer, but that he knows something about the kinds of people that Jesus laid down his life to save.

Paul's words about suffering are in the context of a conversation about the justification of people. "Not," my friend says, "of people who are strong, and character-filled and hopeful, but the justification of people who are weak, and broken and in despair. That's who Jesus died for. Jesus died for people who strive for endurance, who try to be independent and strong, and who cannot be. Jesus died for people who try to have good character in the midst of bad circumstances, but who fall short again and again. Jesus died for people who try to concoct some hope for themselves, [a] hope that that [cannot help but] to disappoint, every time."<sup>2</sup>

I don't think that Paul meant for his words to take the sting out of suffering. I think he meant for them to locate God in the midst of it.

Within the swirl of the many variations of Christianity that surround us is this belief that our faith in Christ can somehow protect us from the realities of life.

Maybe I'm just reading a different Bible or attending the wrong schools, but I don't see anything about the walk of a disciple of Jesus that promises to shield us from suffering.

From what I can tell...  
Being a Christian won't make you safe.  
Being a Christian won't make you rich.  
Being a Christian won't make your life easy.

But being a Christian does mean that no matter what happens to us in this life, we are never alone. We are never without the presence of our God who lived and died and was raised to secure our salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> MaryAnn McKibben Dana, "Suffering, Character, Hope: Romans 5:1-11." *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2005), pp. 35-36. With thanks, too, to the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin whose paper cited MaryAnn's remarks.

It was the Quaker William Penn who said that we could not fall beneath the arms of God. However low we fall, they are still underneath us.<sup>3</sup> William Sloan Coffin, long-time preacher at Riverside Church in New York City said that the Christian life offers “minimum protection but maximum support.” This, I think, is true.

And I think I’ve seen it – this suffering which produces endurance; this endurance that produces character; this character that produces hope.

I’ve seen it the life of Mary.

From the outside, Mary’s life seems quite normal. Privileged, even.

She drives a Lexus. She lives in a lovely gated community with a lot of house and almost no yard. She has cute grandchildren – two of whom live in the same city as Mary.

What is not obvious about Mary is that she has spent most of her time over the last decade taking care of a husband with Alzheimer’s disease. For the first few years, no one noticed Oliver’s symptoms except Mary. She covered for him well...reminding him of people’s names when he had forgotten, anniversary dates so there would be flowers, kids and grandkids birthdays so that there would be presents.

Things progressed – and Oliver would take the car to meet someone for lunch and then forget where he was and need Mary to come find him. Worried that he might miss the chance to give his family gifts at Christmas, Oliver would go on a shopping spree at the mall, and then go back the next day to buy the same things because he didn’t remember being there a day before.

Not only was Mary spending almost every waking minute of the day making sure that her husband of 40 years stayed safe – forgoing vacations and church retreats and evening commitments – but now the disease had also changed his personality.

In sickness and in the health, in joy and in sorrow, to be sure...but the once-doting husband that Mary was caring for was spiteful and insulting. The disease had robbed him – robbed them – of the ability to tell the stories of their romance, or imagine the future for their grandchildren. It was as if they were both locked in a prison from which they could not escape.

Mary would often visit me in my office. Behind the closed door, the cracks were visible. The tears would flow. She was weary. Helpless. Suffering.

But I would also see Mary in Bible study, and in Sunday school – many times teaching. There, I would listen as Mary plumbed the depths of faith...wrestling with scripture, speaking passionately about what the resurrection of Christ meant for her

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<sup>3</sup> Again, with thanks to Meg.

and for the world around her. She was a compelling witness – more so to those who were familiar with her struggle.

Here's what I know: the reason that Mary was able to be this kind of witness – much less able to function in her day-to-day life – is because in her suffering she discovered a hope upon which she could stand. There aren't answers for why Mary (or Oliver) suffer, but through her experience, she understands in ways that not all of us yet do, that God's presence is real and undeniable and necessary.

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Our passage this morning begins with a declaration: *Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...*

Paul is very clear: It is not because of what we do or what we do not do or what we deserve. The hope that undergirds our life is a gift.

And so, when Paul talks about  
Suffering producing endurance  
And endurance producing character  
And character producing hope.

I don't believe he is providing us a prescription for how to make it through the difficult times of life unscathed.

I think he is offering these words as a testimony – given by someone who has suffered – about what he has learned of God's presence and God's promises.

And what he has found is that, ultimately, God's hope does not disappoint.

Amen.