

March 31, 2024 Easter Sunday Sermon – Mark 16:1-8

The headline in the March 30, 2024 Globe and Mail on page A14 reads: “Ukraine’s mothers in exile find hope in new life.” It shares the stories of three women who are pregnant or have given birth since their country has been under attack beginning in 2022. The authors of the article, Paul Waldie and Anna Liminowicz, write these words: “Whatever their views, Ukraine’s mothers share something in common: a new beginning of life with the promise of hope.” One of the women, Nadia Spodyniuk, said: “‘Putin and this war are fighting me,’ and then she added, “No, he doesn’t win. I will have a baby and there will be life.’”

Today is Easter Sunday and once again billions of Christians around the world focus on and hang onto the same thing Nadia does – hope! That is the primary message of Easter for me and millions of other people – HOPE!

This message of hope is needed now just as much as it was needed two thousand years ago when Jesus walked along the dusty pathways of his homeland in Israel. That message of hope is needed today in both Israel and Palestine as violence and war is causing so much pain and suffering. The vast majority of everyday citizens in those countries want an end to the war, an end to the violence, an end to the hatred, and a path to peace.

The same can be said of the majority of people living in Russia and Ukraine whose soldiers are killing one another. I believe they too want an end to the bloodshed and harm being done and look forward to a time of peace.

Sadly, in both these situations, and in many other similar situations throughout the world, now and in the past, there are people with power who have succumbed to hatred, greed, and egotistical behaviour. These so-called leaders then use their power and authority to send thousands upon thousands of their country’s citizens to their death, while making sure they themselves stay safe, away from the dangers of the front line and the battles that take place there.

Jesus lived in a time and place when he and his fellow citizens were being oppressed by the political, military, religious, and business leaders who controlled

their country. Not all of the leaders did this, but it seems the majority did, some of them by simply doing nothing. The people of his country were crying out for help and relief. They were reaching a breaking point as their pain and suffering, due to poverty, homelessness, and oppression robbed them of little chance to change the situation. They were in danger of losing all hope, and many of them had already succumbed to hopelessness.

Then, along comes Jesus, who was one of them, born without privilege, power or wealth, who begins preaching a message of freedom, of peace, of possibilities, and the people dare to hope once again. That hope culminates in the procession into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which we focused on last Sunday. Jesus challenges the people with power to change their ways. He marches into the temple and overturns the money tables and drives out the merchants. He calls the religious leaders hypocrites. He leads a peaceful protest of an unfair system.

Jesus was hoping to be like Moses who had led the Hebrews out of oppression, slavery and poverty in Egypt many years before, but it was not to be.

Jesus was arrested on false charges, found guilty on the testimony of false witnesses, tortured without a fair trial, and condemned to death by crucifixion on a Roman cross, which was the approved method of killing people who threatened the power and authority of the Roman Caesar. It was at the urging and manipulation of the religious leaders that this travesty of justice was carried out. With the death of Jesus, his disciples, followers, and the people of Israel who had been daring to put their hope in Jesus, lost hope once again. What a devastating loss it was for the millions of people who were being oppressed. What a glorious triumph it was for their powerful and wealthy oppressors. We focused on this part of the Holy Week story on Good Friday.

I can imagine this is how countless people have felt over the centuries when they have been oppressed and someone arises from within their ranks who they hope will lead them to freedom. The most recent example of this that I can think of is in Russia when Alexei Navalny, the leader of the opposition to President Putin, was arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed. With his death, many Russians have lost hope for meaningful change in their country.

But then we come to the part of the story that so many people look forward to and hang onto, especially those people who are worn down by oppression, mired in the depths of depression, struggling with the pain of loss and suffering due to some situation that seems beyond their ability to fix.

Maybe you have had a much loved spouse, partner, family member or friend die, and the loss of that person has left you feeling depressed, lethargic, or without purpose. So much of your joy and meaning in life was connected to that person that without his, her, or their presence, you feel lost, even hopeless. You find it difficult to sleep at night or even have the energy to cook meals, meet with people, or do the things that you once did so easily. Similar feelings can sometimes happen when a relationship comes to an end for other reasons.

Possibly, you are experiencing financial difficulties and risk losing your home or face bankruptcy. Maybe it's because your employment has been terminated or the company you work for has closed down. For whatever reason, the stress of financial poverty can result in people feeling like a failure and losing hope.

Maybe you are in the midst of some health challenge, one that threatens your well-being or limits your ability to do the things you once took for granted. It might be a life-altering injury or it could be a prognosis that leaves you wondering if death is knocking at your door. When our once healthy bodies or minds are confronted with sickness, disease or injury, we often struggle to maintain a positive outlook on life and can succumb to feelings of hopelessness.

Possibly you have done harm to someone or someone has done harm to you, and the guilt or shame has left you with emotional pain, maybe even PTSD, resulting in feelings of hopelessness or suicidal thoughts.

So, what can we do when situations such as these or other situations arise that threaten us and leave us feeling fearful, anxious or hopeless? That is what the Easter story or event attempts to answer.

After the death of Jesus, most of his family, his friends, his followers, and his fellow citizens, ran and hid out of fear that they would also be arrested, tortured, and

killed. All those who had dared to hope that Jesus was the one who would lead them out of oppression, suffering, and hopelessness were overcome by fear. It was a very real fear with the possibility that if it happened to Jesus, it could happen to them too. For days they hid away, out of sight.

Then, a ridiculous story arises. It seems some women had gone to the tomb of Jesus, and the huge stone blocking the entrance into the tomb cut into the side of a rock cliff had been rolled away. The body of Jesus was not there. According to the Gospel of Mark, the women were initially filled with both terror and amazement and fled from the tomb, not saying anything to anyone. Whether they believed they had a dream, a vision, or a message from an angel sitting by the tomb doesn't really matter. Only later, in the other Gospels, does this story get changed, fleshed out, and expanded on. What does matter is that, eventually, hope was restored for these women and they believed Jesus was alive.

This, I think, is the beauty and power of the Easter story. It is not just about Jesus coming back to life, in whatever way that might have happened or whatever form that might have taken. It is about the restoration of hope with the birth of new life. He is not dead. He is alive! Whether one believes this literally or metaphorically isn't as important as the hope it creates.

Do you remember the article from the Globe and Mail I shared with you at the start of this message? In it, we are introduced to three women from Ukraine who the authors of the story say this about: "Whatever their views, Ukraine's mothers share something in common: a new beginning of life with the promise of hope."

Without the possibility of new beginnings, new life or rebirth, death or the prospect of death can lead us down a dark path to despair, fear, and hopelessness. Why do you think so many people fear death? Certainly, we are all afraid of any pain or suffering that might accompany death or the process of dying. But, for most people, it's more than that. It's the fear that we will cease to exist in any meaningful way that frightens us most. Not for everyone, but for many. We also fear the loss of time to enjoy moments and experiences with those we love and care about, unless we are living with extreme pain, physically or mentally, and we are unable to enjoy life anymore because of that.

Earlier, I described four situations that anyone of us might find ourselves in for a variety of reasons. We might experience the loss of a loved one, either through death or the end of a relationship. We might go through a time of financial hardship. We might have a health issue. We might cause harm to someone or been harmed by someone. Any of these situations, or others I have not mentioned, can leave us feeling hopeless. This is the Good Friday experience.

However, when we have an Easter experience as well, the hopelessness that might accompany loss, fear, pain, and suffering can, over time and with help from those who love us and care about us, be replaced with hope. I know it's hard to believe that when the loss is only recent and the pain is still raw, and it would not be of much comfort to tell anyone at that moment that time will heal all.

Did you know that various studies claim some seventy to eighty percent of people in North America believe in life beyond our present life in some manner. This includes Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others who dare to believe that this once in a lifetime physical existence is not all there is. None of us can say whether that is true or not, but what is true is that it brings comfort and hope to countless people who have had loved ones die or who are facing death themselves. Some people would say that is just wishful or naïve thinking that is not based in fact, but I ask you, what harm is there in such a belief? Why would anyone want to take hope away from people who believe in an afterlife of joy and peace?

But, on a more practical level, why would anyone want to take hope away from people who are suffering here on this earth for any reason?

Yes, Alexei Navalny is dead. From what I have read, many people lost hope when he died. But I think this is primarily because of the initial shock. I believe and hope that his example will inspire others to follow him or take his place in the peaceful protest against authoritarianism – not only in his country but in all places in the world where a minority of powerful people oppress the less powerful majority.

Yes, many people have suffered greatly when a loved one has died, but I have seen time and time again a measure of healing occur and hope return as the initial shock and despair that so often accompanies that loss lessens.

Yes, many people will go through financial hardship, poverty, and homelessness, often for reasons beyond their control, but simply because of being born in a certain place at a certain time, such as the millions of people living in the Middle East at the present time. However, hope is possible if other people help bring the violence to an end and provide food, medical help and other forms of support.

Yes, many people will experience health problems that may threaten their way of life or the length of their life, but with advances in medicine, a health system dedicated to the care of all people, and the willingness of governments and others to provide healthcare, people can live with at least some degree of hope.

Yes, many people will do harm to others and be harmed by others that may cause them to experience emotional pain, but with forgiveness of themselves and others, which is one of the central themes of Easter, there is hope for healing.

If women in Ukraine, who have gone through all that is happening in their home country, can experience hope with the new lives they give birth to, hopefully we can as well, with a belief in renewed life, no matter what situation we are in.

May we all know the joy and hope of the Easter experience!

