

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – April 20, 2025
How to Live as a Person of Hope
Isaiah 65:17-25

Easter Sunday is about hope, about the hope we have that there is world beyond this world, a world we are not born into, but die into: a world where all those who have lived in this world live on, a world where all those who have loved in this world love on, a world where death is no more, and mourning and crying and pain is no more, a world of light, a world – *another* world – of goodness and beauty and peace.

Some people picture it as, like, a game of golf or a day out on the water or a Taylor Swift concert or a wine tasting that goes on and on forever. Some people picture their husbands or their wives there with them; some people do *not* picture their husbands or their wives there with them. ☺

Other people don't know what to picture. They conceive of it more abstractly, as becoming one with the universe or one with God, as being enfolded into a great gentleness, as being – in some mysterious sense – as being at rest. Easter Sunday is about hope, about the hope we have that there is a world beyond this world – that there is a *heaven* beyond our dying.

I will say that I find it both impossible to believe in heaven and impossible *not* to believe in heaven. Some days I believe more, and some days I believe less. But there is no day that I don't hope... I think that hoping for something can be a way of knowing something. Hoping for something can be its own way of knowing something. Not necessarily in any straightforward, one-to-one sense, but if there is a way of having hope that approaches wishful thinking and foolishness, there is also a way of having hope that approaches wisdom and truth.

And the fact that almost everyone who has ever lived has hoped that there is some sort of living on is a thing I take very seriously. It is easy to be cynical – especially when, in our society, cynicism is so often confused for honesty and even for intelligence; it is easy to be cynical and to say simply that we all are afraid of death and would rather fantasize our way around it than face it. But that just seems to me to be one of the *least* interesting ways to make sense of one of the *most* interesting things, one of the most interesting things about us human beings, which is, how impossible it is for us not to hope this most impossible – and most wonderful – hope.

Easter Sunday is about hope, but not *only* about the hope we have that there is a world beyond this world. Easter Sunday is also about the hope, about the *hopes*, we have for *this* world. For as long as there have been Christians, they have – we have – believed that if hope for a world where there is no suffering, no weeping, no deprivation, no pain – that if hope for a world like this is worth having, *it is a hope we should not only wait upon but work toward*, work toward here and now.

For as long as there have been Christians, they have – we have – believed that within our dreams of heaven, there are hidden dreams for the earth, and that within *those* dreams for the earth are hidden responsibilities. Before there *were* Christians, Christ taught this; we pray for this, as Christ taught us, every week: “Thy kingdom *come*. Thy will be done *on earth*, as it is in heaven.” Before there was *Christ*, even, the Hebrew prophets taught this. For them, the question, the

ultimate, unanswerable question, “What happens when we die?” was almost always posed and pondered as if it were in fact another question: the urgent, actionable question, “How now should we live?”

For instance: The Hebrew prophet Zechariah imagined heaven as a heaven-on-earth where (and I am quoting) “old men and old women shall again sit in the streets, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.” The prophet Zechariah imagined elders sitting out, laughing, reminiscing amongst themselves, and growing young as they watched over children chalking the sidewalks and playing catch. This was the heaven, this was the heaven-on-earth, that the prophet Zechariah dreamed could be more than a dream.

As far as utopias go, it is a modest one. It is a utopia which has always been very much within our power to build. But, of course, to this day, in a great many places, a hope as humble as this seems as impossibly fantastical as dreams of mingling with Mother Teresa and Mozart as angels come around with flutes of prosecco and tuna tartare. But it is no less worth working toward for that.

Another Hebrew prophet, the prophet Isaiah, imagined heaven as a heaven-on-earth, too. As you heard read in this morning’s scripture lesson, he imagined a somewhat more utopic utopia, a world *so* at peace that even wolves and sheep, lions and lambs, would live together in harmony. It’s hard to say where heaven begins and heaven-on-earth ends for him. To imagine, as the prophet Isaiah imagined, being 100 years young and still considered a child, with a mind as quick and a memory as capacious as it was at the age when you knew everything about every dinosaur or all the elements of the periodic table, and with a body free of aches and pains – we aren’t exactly talking eternity here, but we’re in the ballpark of it.

The prophet Isaiah imagined a world in which pregnancies never end with heartbreak, a world in which, as he said it, no infant “lives but a few days,” and women no longer “labor in vain or bear children for calamity.” What a dream to dream. What a hope to hope. It, too, is so humble: To get to grow up and to grow old – is that so much to ask for? The prophet Isaiah imagined a world in which – in which, well, let’s just say, in which the housing market isn’t what it is in Darien, Connecticut in the year of our Lord 2025: in which a roof over one’s head isn’t a luxury. “*The people shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat.*” He imagined a world in which the poor do not lose their homes and lose everything.

To make the same point another way: It goes without saying that all of these spry 100-somethings will be able *to afford* to live on that long, that all their retirement savings won’t have turned to dust in totally avoidable market downturns. And that Medicaid will still exist – so that the children of the neediest mothers won’t otherwise be turned out of NICUs, with calamity awaiting them after all. With the way things are going in our country and in our world, I know: To dream the prophet Isaiah’s dream feels like dreaming an impossible dream. To hope the prophet Isaiah’s hope feels like hoping an impossible hope.

And yet: A world where there is peace – peace among nations, peace among neighbors. A world where there is plenty. Why should that be such a utopia? Why shouldn't the prophet Isaiah's world be more than a fantasy-world? Why shouldn't it be *this* world? Why shouldn't it be *our* world? Why shouldn't it be the world we leave for our children and for our children's children? I'll say that I find it both impossible to believe that we can change things and impossible *not* to believe that we can change things.

Every day, I read the paper; every day, I watch the news. And some days I believe more, and some days I believe less. But there is no day that I don't hope. Hoping for something – for change, for a better world, for a fairer world, for a world, if not with no, than at least with less suffering and weeping and deprivation and pain – hoping these hopes for the world is a way of knowing something about the world: about the goodness and the promise that God has hidden in the heart of it, about what it can be and what it will, what the world will – yes, *will* – be. If there is a way of having hope for our country and for our world that approaches wishful thinking and foolishness, there is also a way of having hope for our country and for our world that approaches wisdom and truth.

It is easy to be cynical. It is easy to despair. Having hope is hard. Putting that hope to work is harder still. Activism and service and generosity – each is harder still. But the fact that for as long as there have been Christians, and since before there were Christians, and since before there was Christ, even, since the very dawning of human history, as borne witness to in some of the earliest writings in existence, the writings of the old Hebrew prophets, the fact that, from the beginning, from as far back as you can go, *there has been this hope*, this hope for a better world – well, that is a thing I take very seriously. This hope is ancient. This hope is what makes us human. And on Easter Sunday, hear me when I say: This hope is alive. This hope is alive in you.

What will you do with it? How will you live as a person of hope? Going on twenty years ago now, in the midst of an earlier era of institutional collapse and economic turmoil, Tim Geithner, president of the New York Fed and, later, Secretary of the Treasury, was fond of saying, "Hope is not a strategy." By which he meant: We can't wish crises away. We can't wish all the havoc, all the real harm that has been done – we can't wish it all away. He meant something like what is meant in the scripture which warns, "Faith, without works, is dead."

So too, *hope, without works, is dead*. The hope in you is alive. It is real resurrection hope. It is your Christian inheritance. How will you keep it alive? What will you do with it? I can tell you – it is my *job* to tell you, to remind you – that this hope is *in you*, and that this hope is of God, and so, that to hope is to go with the grain of God, is to go with the grain of the universe, is to go with the grain of the way things were made to be. It is my job to tell you, to remind you, that, though hoping is hard, it is *not* hard because, in hoping, we run up against and butt our heads against reality and, so, only make naïve, silly, idealists of ourselves. No.

Reality is God. What's *really* Real is God. To hope God's own hopes for the world, to dream God's own dreams for the world – impossible as these hopes are, impossible as these dreams are – *this* makes you a *realist*. It is my job to tell you that: To hope, because it's not silly. To hope, because it's not naïve. To hope, because there is an earth-shaking, light-creating,

darkness-abating, dead-waking Power in you, because there is such a thing as Easter freaking Sunday.

That is my job. It is *your* job to figure out what God needs you to do with that hope, and what God needs you to do with that power. It is *your* job to figure out how to shape that hope and that power, that holy power, into a strategy. May it be so. Alleluia. Amen.