

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Hope Is a Thing with Feathers”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Resurrection of the Lord / Easter (Year C)

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Isaiah 65:17–25; 1 Corinthians 5:19–26; Luke 24:1–12

It was a beautiful spring day, not unlike today.

Our three children, much younger then, were sitting around the kitchen table,
splashing through their Cheerios and Rice Krispies
before donning backpacks to head off to school.

All of a sudden, we heard a muffled thud from the bay window
on the front side of the house.

Chairs slid back noisily as we all rushed out the front door to see
what had left a fluffy smudge on the clear, wide pane.

What we found, lying at our feet in the pine straw,
was a beautiful red bird with black wings.

Not a cardinal because we were familiar with those;
this was kind of like a red-winged blackbird because we knew those, too,
but in reverse.

This was something quite different than we were used to seeing.
And it looked perfect, yet motionless, not broken as it lay serenely still.

What is it, my children wanted to know? Do you think it's dead?

I ran to the bookshelf and pulled down my handy reference, *Birds of the Carolinas*,
and flipped to the “red” category... and found it there: a male scarlet tanager.

My children were starting to tear up at this point,
giving me that doe-eyed “do something” look.

(BTW, these are the same children who once sent me back to the scene of
a deer-to-car accident in WV to try and perform CPR on the deer.

Fortunately, the deer got up and walked off before I had to intervene!)

The bird still lay motionless, and it was almost time for them to leave for school,
and so I said, “Okay, let’s put the bird in an open shoe box
and place him on our patio in the sun.

Maybe he’s just stunned, and he’ll revive in the warmth and fly away.”

Personally, I doubted it. The bird still looked perfect, but limp when I picked it up
to put it in the shoe box, and its head lolled to one side as I lay it down.

But we all had that strange sense of hope that the poet Emily Dickinson talks
about in her poem:

*Hope is a thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.*

The capacity to hope—hopefulness—is a fundamental human perspective
that allows a person to imagine *a future as possible*.

Hope is an enduring source of strength, courage, and ingenuity in the face of tragedy.
Desmond Tutu says that “hope is being able to see that there is light
despite all of the darkness.”

The source of hope, though, is one of life’s greatest mysteries, isn’t it?

For those of us grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition,
whence cometh our hope?

The writers of the Old Testament tell us to “put your hope in God” (Psalm 42:5),
to “find rest, O my soul, in God alone, my hope comes from him” (Psalm 65:6),
that “hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12),
but that those who “*hope in the Lord* will renew their strength,

they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary,
will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

And then in the New Testament, hope is intricately linked to faith:

"now *faith* is being sure of what we *hope* for,
and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1).

Hope is one of the three greatest Christian virtues:

"faith, *hope*, and love... [but] the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

But basically, our hope lies in the Easter event, God's resurrection of Jesus:

the perfect one, broken and wounded for our transgressions,
the one who burst the bonds of sin and death,
and rose with healing in his wings.

"Among the Gentiles, God has chosen to make known

the glorious riches of this mystery," Paul says in Colossians,

"the hope of glory, which is Christ... IN YOU" (Colossians 1:27).

If I hear Paul correctly, dare I say it, *the hope of Christ is in each one of us!*

Through Christ, we believers are the things with feathers:

the hope bearers to our sadly broken and fearful world.

Lately, I have been fascinated by a book by Dan Ephron, entitled *Killing a King*.

Since I am forgetful of much of the history of Israel and greater Palestine,

Ephron's book has reminded me anew

that Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in November 1995

by one of his own people, twenty-five year old Yigal Amir,

a Jewish right-wing extremist and law student.

Amir became enraged and obsessed with killing Rabin,

after Rabin engaged in the peace-making exercises of the Oslo accords
with PLO-leader Yassir Arafat that would have brokered reconciliation

between Palestinian and Jewish peoples, including the return of settlement
lands in Gaza and the West Bank to original Palestinian ownership.

Acting upon an orthodox Jewish principle called *Shulchan Aruch*,

which claims that "a person who hands over the cities of Israel
to a foreign ruler is a *moser* and in principle a death sentence
applies to him so that he doesn't cause the death of other (Jews) ,"
Amir rationalized that he was justified in taking the life of Rabin
in order to protect the lives of his own people. (Ephron. *Killing a King*, p. 201)

And so he murdered Yitzhak Rabin at the conclusion of a peace rally.

As the Prime Minister was exiting the stage, Amir took his life.
At the hospital, they later found inside the breast pocket of the Prime Minister's jacket
a blood-stained copy of "A Song for Peace" from the rally:

Sing a song for peace, don't whisper a prayer.

Better to sing a song for peace, shout it out loud.

Amir was acting upon ancient Jewish wisdom, his brother testified,
that says, "killing a king is profoundly significant; it affects the entire
nation and alters its destiny." (Ephron, *Killing a King*, p. 197)

Amir had hoped to kill peace. Amir had hoped to kill reconciliation.

Amir had hoped to kill hope for the Palestinian people,
and "hope deferred makes the heart sick."

And I have been thinking about the endless array of forces
lined up from one end of history to the other, the powers and principalities,
from Zionists, to Hamas, to the Irish Republican Army (IRA), to the KKK,
to Boko Haram, to ISIS, to the Dylan Roofs, and others more local,
all focused upon disturbing and disrupting the peace,
but especially intent upon killing hope for an intended group of people.

And I have been thinking poignantly about Jesus, the Christ,
the whole time that I have been reading *Killing a King*.

Jesus, the peacemaker, Jesus, the reconciler, Jesus, the hope-bringer
also was taken down by his own people *in hope*

that in killing the "King of the Jews," they would alter the destiny of his kingdom,
of God's kingdom, and prevent that movement from taking wing.

And they almost succeeded. For three days, it looked like the ancient assassins
had hit their mark, had achieved their goal, had squelched hope for our world.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn,

[the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

but when they went in, they did not find the body.

Suddenly, two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground,

but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

He is not here; but has risen. Remember... (Luke 24:1-6)

Hope was on the wing. The peace song goes on, loudly. Christ is alive.

And now we, through Christ, in Christ, are the things with feathers: the hope-bearers.

"Hope," Victor Hugo once said, "is the word God has written on the brow
of every human being."

We, the things with feathers, are called to *offer hope* to displaced people,

whether they are displaced by war, or by threat, by economic downturn,

or by gentrification, which is economic upturn, or by climate change:

both to those beyond our immediate knowing, as well as to those known to us.

We, the things with feathers, are called to *bring hope*, understanding,

acceptance, comfort, and stability to those struggling

with deep grief, depression, addiction or any form of brain disease.

We, the things with feathers, are called to *model hope* by creating a diverse unity

among ourselves, right here, across lines of race, faith, ability, gender,

and ethnicity to demonstrate for the world

God's boundary defying, wall denying kingdom love.

Things with feathers, as you know, have very little respect for walls!

We, the things with feathers, are called to *make room for hope*

by calling out those who would provoke fear, discrimination and hate

and the violence that stems from such.

We, the things with feathers, are the hope-bearers who keep singing the songs for peace and justice, shouting them vigorously, knowing that they will resonate even more loudly through the empty tomb because Christ is alive through the resurrecting power of God's love which promises new beginnings, new life, and new hope.

One of our candidates running for president was visited by a little thing with feathers that perched on his podium on Friday. It looked to be a finch, but he claimed it was a dove and certainly saw it as a sign of hope.

A beautiful piece issued by the 212 General Assembly of the PC(USA) called *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ* casts the dark reality of our human predicament in the light of the Christ event with this profoundly hopeful statement:

Jesus Christ is with us in life and death.

But death is not the last word, for God has raised him from the dead and exalted him above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

The risen Christ is the living Lord of the cosmos...

*... For the sake of the world, the Word became flesh,
for the sake of the world, Jesus Christ lived among us,
was crucified and raised from the dead.*

*For the sake of the world, Christ ascended to heaven,
and for the sake of the world, Christ will come again.*

All of this is God's good pleasure set forth in Christ "as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" [Ephesians 1:10].

(from Hope In the Lord Jesus Christ, lines 34-47,

214 GA – 2002 for study by the church, the Office of Theology and Worship)

And by the way, when my children came home from school that day, the shoebox was empty and the red bird had taken wing. Amen.