

“Choose Life!”
Ephesians 1:17-19

We are talking, in this season of Easter, about what it means to really live. Not just keep breathing, not just survive, not just *not die*—but really to live. If life itself is so important that Christ’s resurrection that first Easter really is to mean something to us now; if that second and third and fourth chance at life that we are offered through resurrection in our own lives is valuable enough to make us thirst for it, then the life God hopes for us must be something more than the just-getting-by numbness that can pass for the kind of living we see all around us.

Historians say that in the first centuries after Jesus lived, Christianity failed to spread quickly in the far eastern civilizations of the world because the older and more established religious traditions in the East (primarily Hinduism) taught that life was intended to be a rigorous and not necessarily pleasant, training ground for the soul. That the end of life on this earth brought reincarnation—life over and over again if necessary—until you had learned the lessons that you were supposed to learn and your soul deserved a rest. In that context, the continuation of life—one more round of it—seemed more like punishment than reward. So when the early Christian missionaries came and preached resurrection, life after death didn’t really sound very good to the people they were preaching to. Who wanted to go through life again? They’d rather be done with it; *ending* the cycle of reincarnation was the reward for a good life. So Christianity didn’t catch on very well in that part of the world.

We’re belong to a different tradition. We want to believe that Jesus meant something we can depend on when he said, “I have come so that you might have life *abundantly*.” But many of us don’t feel like we’re living abundant lives. We’re just trying to get by. We spend a lot of energy simply resisting death. We know the lifestyle choices recommended to avoid the leading causes of death: walk more, wash your hands, floss, eat green things, wear a seat belt. It’s important to follow the experts’ advice about health. All those things *will* help you live longer. But they won’t make you more alive. Our health care industry and medical technology can sometimes keep us alive longer, but they can’t offer us the abundant life we long for, the life I’m pretty sure Jesus was talking about. There must be something more. Do we know, in concrete terms, how to align ourselves with the leading causes of life, the things will not just help us avoid death, but help us thrive, to live an abundant and deeply satisfying life?

Hope is one of those things. Hope is a force that can bring a sense of abundance with it in the midst of difficult, or even terrible, circumstances. Hope is one of the leading causes not of death, but of life.

Maybe you have some of the same reaction I do when I hear the word “hope”. I like the idea, but my guard goes up. In those moments when I am looking at a harsh reality—in my own life or somewhere else in the world—and it really is as bad as it looks, I don’t want to hear platitudes, or mind-over-matter cheerleading, or stories about how someone else has it worse. I need to be reminded that there’s a difference between hope and wishful thinking. That there is a way to know and to accept what just *is* in your life—to live grace-fully with the things we cannot change—and to have hope at the same time. I want to know that it’s possible to have hope even with your eyes wide open to what reality is, to have hope alongside disappointments we can admit to, maybe even to have hope at the same time your heart is breaking.

One of the ways I know what hope is is that I have seen it in the life of Molly Schaechtele. Molly joined our congregation last year, after moving recently to Sacramento. Molly knows what it means to live with her eyes open to the reality of death, and to find in that reality the possibility of more life. I can't wait for you to hear her story.

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What do we hope for—for ourselves and for other people we care deeply about? What is the hope that, if we keep it before us, will lead us not just to rail against the circumstances of our lives, but to find real life in the midst of them? I think real hope—real grounded, informed, sustaining hope—comes when we find and attach ourselves to a story that is larger than our own. A story and a hope that are bigger than what we might wish our own lives looked like. A hope that calls us to keep our eyes on something beyond the present circumstances of our life. In the passage from Ephesians we read this morning, Paul's best prayer for the people he wrote to, people he loved, was for this kind of hope. I pray, he said, that the eyes of your heart will be open enough so that you can see—so that you will really *know*—what is the *hope* to which God has called you, the richness of *God's* hope for all of creation, and the immeasurable greatness of God's power to make all things well in the end, no matter what the present looks like.

This is my prayer for you too. Choose hope. Choose life.