

# “Anchored!”

1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 13-20 <sup>1</sup>

Several of you have commented on my renewed energy upon return from our recent vacation. I'll have to agree that I've felt more renewed after this trip than I've felt in a long time; but I'm not sure the vacation itself was the primary source of my renewal. Being away and with our grandchildren was wonderful indeed, but I think it was the CBF meeting in Charlotte that provided the spark.

In my first sermon upon my return, I suggested to you that our primary needs as a congregation in the summer of 2010 are three: we need CULTIVATED HEARTS, A COMPELLING VISION, and A COMMITMENT TO VICTORY. Last week we looked again at “cultivated hearts.” Today I want to consider “a compelling vision,” and it's in this area that Charlotte was so helpful.

Dr. Jerome Groopman, a physician on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, wrote a book a few years ago called *The Anatomy of Hope*.<sup>2</sup> In an interview following its publication, Dr. Groopman was asked about his definition of hope. He replied, “Basically, I think hope is the ability to see a path to the future. . . . You are facing dire circumstances, and you need to know everything that's blocking or threatening you. And then you see a path, or a potential path, to get to where you want to be. Once you see that, there's a tremendous emotional uplift that occurs.”<sup>3</sup> I think that the “tremendous emotional uplift” I've felt in the last month has come from a new “ability to see a path to the future” for us as a congregation, a path I discovered in Charlotte, a path that leads to a compelling vision for our next chapter together.

As I've noted already since my return, we at First Baptist Bristol have a great history, a good foundation, an iconic location, a beautiful sanctuary, a faithful core, increasing baptisms, increasing new members, a large cadre of wise saints, a significant number of younger believers, a capable staff, a streamlined structure, increasing missional involvement, an absence of conflict, an abundance of affection, and durability of relationships—fifteen significant assets that many congregations do not possess, and for which we give hearty thanks to God!

But alongside these good things, many of us also confess to a deep weariness, a generalized spiritual fatigue, and the fire of our commitment is flagging. We need a new sense of a compelling vision that will capture our imaginations, compel our commitment, and advance the Kingdom of God in ways that we in this congregation are uniquely prepared to do.

Our problem has been that we didn't—or more specifically, I didn't—know “how to get there from here.” It hasn't been clear to me what we needed to do in order to rekindle our devotion and renew our spirits in order to move forward with strength. I didn't see a suitable path to the future that I thought would work for us . . . but now I do. This path is a congregational process that I'll begin to unpack over the weeks ahead, a process of spiritual discernment that will help us pursue the full Kingdom potential of our church.<sup>4</sup>

There are at least four dynamics that will be at work over the next six months to propel us into an exciting new chapter together. The first of these is our spiritual preparation for our renewal services in September; the second is that very sequence of services on September 12-14; the third is

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on July 25, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Groopman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* (New York: Random House, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Jerome Groopman, quoted in Rachel K. Sobel, “The Mysteries of Hope and Healing,” *U.S. News & World Report*, January 26, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> The essence of this process is described in George Bullard, Jr., *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005).

our trip to Wilmington in October to be encouraged by how God has transformed a sister congregation; and the fourth is the renewal process that we'll begin together at some point this fall.

This renewal process, called a "Spiritual Strategic Journey," will involve a great deal of prayer and conversation together in groups both small and large. I meet with Glenn Akins from the Virginia Baptist Mission Board in two weeks to think more concretely about it, after which I'll have more to say about how it can work for us. I'm also consulting with Dr. Dan Elash in Charlottesville about this process as it takes more shape in my mind.

While all this is going on, while we're discovering God's COMPELLING VISION and then COMMITTING ourselves to it, part of our preparation involves renewing our grip on the **anchor** of our faith and on the **Hope** that pulls us forward into the future. That's what claims our attention this morning.

Apart from several mentions of literal boat anchors, the Bible uses the metaphor of an anchor only twice—one in the Old Testament and one in the New. Psalm 119 notes that "*Evil people try to drag me into sin, but **I am firmly anchored to your instructions***" (119:61); and Hebrews reminds us that "*we who have fled to [God] for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. **This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls***" (6:18b-19a).

I've been reminded this week that in order to experience genuine spiritual renewal, we need a firm hold on Truth that is anchored in who Jesus is; and our texts this morning help us in that project. Jesus' identity is critical for Christian faith because He is both the object and the anchor of that faith; but there are unfortunately many these days who use the adjective "Christian" without either knowing or affirming what must be known and affirmed in order for that adjective to apply.

There are many today who want to call Jesus "a good man," "a moral teacher," or something else—often *anything* else—besides God who *really* became a man, who *really* died, and who *really* rose from death; He who was, who is, and who is to come; the ever-living and Eternal One without whom there is no salvation; and they want to do this while still calling themselves "Christian."

We live in an age in which people are willing to tolerate virtually anything except the affirmation that "*There is salvation in no one else [but Jesus]! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). I fear that there are many even in the church who are reluctant to make this claim.

But as I've pointed out before, Jesus did not give us the choice of calling Him "a good man" or "a moral teacher." By His clear claim to be the eternal God in human flesh, He left us only the choices of calling Him crazy, calling Him a liar, or calling Him Lord. If we call Jesus crazy or call Him a liar, then we have no accountability to Him and can disregard His teaching, which is what people are really trying to do more discreetly when they call Him "good" or "moral."

But here's the deal. Jesus told us that "*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*" (John 14:9); "*The Father and I are one*" (John 10:30); "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). Those claims are crystal clear, and the only way to get around them is to either call Jesus crazy or to call Him a liar. Otherwise, those claims stand, and Jesus is the Lord Christ, before whom every knee will bow, soon or late (Philippians 2:10-11).

That's where today's text comes in. Hear these words once more: <sup>3</sup> *I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ **died** for our sins, just as the Scriptures said.* <sup>4</sup> *He was **buried**, and he was **raised** from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said.* <sup>5</sup> *He was **seen** by Peter and then by the Twelve.* <sup>6</sup> *After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.* <sup>7</sup> *Then he*

was seen by James and later by all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

This confession of faith—that Jesus **died**, was **buried**, was **raised**, and was **seen**—was the essence of the message of the early church, and today’s text is our earliest written record of this affirmation. So who saw Jesus alive again after his crucifixion? Paul lists himself, Peter, all twelve apostles (with Matthias in Judas’ place; Acts 1:26), Jesus’ brother, James, and five hundred others.

The Gospel accounts include nine different “sightings” of the resurrected Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Jesus appeared indoors, outdoors, to believers and to skeptics. He materialized and dematerialized at will. He was touchable, and He could eat and drink. These appearances continued for several weeks, with an abrupt and definable ending.

That’s the eyewitness evidence. But Lee Strobel, former legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, has observed that while eyewitness evidence “is often compelling, it can sometimes be subject to faded memories, prejudices, and even outright fabrication. In contrast, circumstantial evidence is made up of indirect facts from which inferences can be rationally drawn. Its cumulative effect can be every bit as strong—and in many instances even more potent—than eyewitness accounts.”<sup>6</sup>

I’m not suggesting that the eyewitness accounts in the New Testament were defective in any way, but philosopher J.P. Moreland has identified several examples of circumstantial evidence of Jesus’ Resurrection that no one disputes.<sup>7</sup> Let me mention three of them.

First, all of the Twelve Apostles except John were executed because of their testimony that Jesus was *alive*. Were they lying about that? People lie for all kinds of reasons, but chiefly in an attempt to make dishonest profit or to stay out of trouble. Our daily news provides countless examples of this. People also change their stories and tell “what really happened” when this becomes the only avenue of escape from unpleasant consequences.

Yet eleven of the Twelve Apostles—and many other early Christians with them—went to their deaths claiming that Jesus was *alive* and that they had seen Him and talked with Him. And more Christians have been killed in the last one hundred years for claiming that Jesus is alive and that they know Him and have talked with Him than in all of the previous centuries of Christian history. And people don’t die for something that they know is a lie. That’s the first evidence.

Second, powerful skeptics were converted after meeting the resurrected Christ, including Jesus’ half-brother, James, and the famous Pharisee Saul of Tarsus.<sup>8</sup> When Jesus first began to preach, James thought his brother was insane; and Saul’s conversion is rather like the prosecution’s chief witness converting over to the defendant’s side. But both of them were later killed because of their testimony that Jesus was alive once more, and that he was Lord of their lives.

Third, the Jewish people have been able to keep their sense of national identity for more than three thousand years because of their fierce commitment to key components of Judaism. Yet

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<sup>5</sup>(1) Mary Magdalene (John 20:10-18); (2) the other women (Matthew 28:8-10); (3) Cleopas and the other disciple (Luke 24:13-32); (4) eleven disciples and others (Luke 24:33-49); (5) ten apostles and others, without Thomas (John 20:19-23); (6) the apostles with Thomas (John 20:26-30); (7) seven apostles by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14); (8) the disciples again (Matthew 28:16-20); and (9) the apostles and others at Jesus’ Ascension (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:4-9).

<sup>6</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 244-245.

<sup>7</sup> Strobel, pp. 246-255.

<sup>8</sup> Jude, another of Jesus’ half-brothers, was also converted.

within five weeks of Jesus' crucifixion, more than ten thousand Jews abandoned the Law of Moses. They exchanged the Sabbath for the Lord's Day. Absolute monotheism became the Trinity, and their political Messiah "for Jews only" became the Suffering Servant for all the world. Why did thousands of Jews so quickly jettison such central religious beliefs? Because they had met the risen Christ, and had access to the Holy Spirit as never before.

The cry of the early church, the clear kernel of the Gospel, was the four-word affirmation, **DIED! BURIED! RAISED! SEEN!** and our own past conversion, our present conviction and our future Hope are anchored in the fact that we, too, know Him. The ancient affirmation that **Jesus is Lord** remains the anchor of our faith today, and it is not optional for any who would call themselves "Christian."

C. S. Lewis wrote that if God *really* became a man, *really* died, and *really* rose from death, then that event "was the central event in the history of the Earth—the very thing that the whole story has been about."<sup>9</sup> The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's validation that everything Jesus said, did, taught, and promised is True, and that you can confidently build your life upon these things.

Dr. Duane Litfin was President of Wheaton College when he wrote that "From a biblical standpoint, human language can scarcely craft a more profound declaration than this one: **Jesus Christ is Lord**. . . . What do we mean by the Lordship of Christ? We mean that He is the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all things, the Goal of all things, the Redeemer of all things, and the Judge of all things.

"This is an outrageous claim—unless it is true. But if it is true, as Christians do affirm, then it means that the person of Jesus is utterly central to all that humans can know or experience. There is nothing imaginable that is irrelevant to him or to which he is irrelevant. There is no quarter of human learning in which he is not the central figure."<sup>10</sup>

"Jesus Christ is a scandalous stone of stumbling to the world," Litfin wrote. "The all-encompassing nature of the Bible's claims for Jesus renders him unique. He is not merely one Lord, one Savior, among many; he is the singular Sovereign of the universe, the only-begotten Son of the Father, the once-for-all-God-man. If he is truly the universe's Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, the very Goal of all things, then there can be no other."<sup>11</sup> If Jesus is Lord, Dr. Litfin wrote, then He is "the unifying key to all that humans can know or understand, such that in the end nothing can be adequately grasped apart from him."<sup>12</sup>

So here's the bottom line: Jesus is **ALIVE!** Jesus is **HERE!** Jesus is **LORD!** Jesus is **COMING AGAIN!** These four affirmations frame both our **Compelling Vision** and our **Confident Hope**. They compose a "*strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls*" (Hebrews 6:19). Let us then go forward with strength!

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 38-44.

<sup>11</sup> Litfin, p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Litfin, p. 37.