

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
March 28 & 29, 2015
John Crosby
Hope Fulfilled
Hebrews 12:2**

One of the most significant influences on the 21st century was an early 20th century English journalist. He was prolific, wrote all the time, never had an unwritten-down thought. One of his genius abilities was to be able to say, in a few words, what it took other people books to say, and so his words were remembered. His name was G. K. Chesterton. There was once an essay in the *Times of London* that asked, "In 1,000 words or less, what is the biggest problem in the world?" and Chesterton said, "I am." The biggest problem in the world is me. It's inside each one of us. One time Chesterton was asked, "What do you think is the most important thing to know about Christianity?" and Chesterton said, "Jesus promised His disciples three things—that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble." I get one out of three of those right almost all the time. With all this promise of a life that is supposed to be different, how do so many of us live lives that are not just ordinary, they are a little below the ordinary? You keep waiting for the good life to show up. So many fail to finish well.

Last week we had the joy of hearing Dee McIntosh speak and seeing all the kids do the musical. They talked about life as a journey, life as a race, and hope—what we've been talking about all Lent, the ability to stay focused on the finish line of the race. Hope is to not worry about what's happening right now but to stay focused on the finish line. How's that going for you this week? When Dee was talking about running, she spoke from personal experience. She had been a great athlete. She was a runner in high school and in college, she played volleyball. She power lifts now. I power eat. The only running I do now is to Dairy Queen and so I'm not going to talk about the race of life from a personal perspective. I'm only going to use two images out of this same passage, one at the beginning and one at the end, because I want to come at it from a different perspective.

The most famous race in the world almost certainly is the Boston Marathon, right? It started, literally, before our country was formed. Great moments throughout, overcoming explosions in recent years, but the most iconic part of the Boston Marathon is not 26 miles down the road at the finish line. The most memorable part of the Boston Marathon is 20½ miles in. When you finish going through the shops, you turn to a slight hill. The hill goes up for about a mile and a half to Beacon and that hill is called Heartbreak Hill. You are 20½ miles into the race, you are just about dead, and all of a sudden you have to not climb, but run up a hill. In that half-mile, more falls occur than in the rest of the entire race, and more people drop out of the race at Heartbreak Hill than anywhere else in the marathon. I've been thinking about life as a marathon and what causes us to fall and what causes us to drop out.

My first year here 25 years ago, the end of the end of that year or the beginning of my second year here, we had on staff a couple of wonderful, retired clergy who worked part-time in pastoral visitation and hospital calling. They were great people. One of them was named Carl, a retired

Lutheran pastor, a terrific guy, assistant to the bishop, and often, frankly, a little bit of a mentor to me at 36 years old. He would say, “No, no, no, don’t say that! John, you might consider” and I would listen. I got a call one day early in my second year here that one of our staff had been involved in a series of affairs. Before I could gather the pastors to deal with this, I was going to have Carl stand behind me and say, “Look at their faces, Carl,” the Executive Presbyterian came in and said, “It’s Carl Manfred”. I thought, “That’s impossible” but I took Carl out and we went for a long drive. I remember it just like it was yesterday. We stopped at Dairy Queen and ordered a couple of shakes and he not only admitted it, he broke down. He was almost glad to be caught. In our conversation he turned to me and said, “So this means I’ve been disqualified from the race, right? I’m 74 years old. I’ve been disqualified.” This is pastor shorthand. I knew what he meant. “I’ve been disqualified from the race” is a reference to Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians. In 1st Corinthians 9, the apostle Paul says,

²⁴ Don’t you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. ²⁶ So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. ²⁷ I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

That’s what Carl was saying. “I’m at the end of the race and I’ve called others to follow me and I’ve been disqualified at the end.” With tears pouring down his face, he said, “John, this is all they are ever going to remember. Fifty years and this is what they will remember.” And I ended up trying to comfort this man who had done so much harm and who still had a race to finish. He had hit Heartbreak Hill and he had fallen down and he was in grave danger of stopping the race. The apostle Paul uses this image a lot. He obviously is a sports fan. He obviously is not a hockey fan because he talks about the race. He said to the Galatians,

² I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain [Galatians 2:2].

In other words Paul is saying, “I wanted to be sure you were right there behind me, okay? I’m not running alone.” He said,

⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? [Galatians 5:7]

People run, you all run, in life. You are going through the race of faith and along the way, people lose their way and they fall down or they just lose hope, hope that they can do it, hope that they can not even win, just finish. We lose hope and when we lose hope, we catch the disease of discouragement. Discouragement is dis-courage. I have lost courage. I have lost hope. People say hope springs eternal. Anyone who lives in Minnesota knows that that is a lie from hell. There is no spring. Hope is not spring eternal. It is like saying the grass is always greener on the other side. Well, the grass is *not* always greener on the other side. The grass is always greener where it’s watered. This week we are going to look at weeds and crabgrass that choke out the hope on the race to the cross, that trip us up on Heartbreak Hill. I want to use the same passage that Dee did last week from a different perspective. The writer of the Hebrews says in chapter 11,

¹¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

And then he spends the whole chapter 11 talking about ancient heroes of the faith. Then in chapter 12, he says,

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

He finishes,

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So you won't lose hope! This is a perfect time to talk about this because hope is coming to town and despair is going to meet hope at the city gates. Hope and despair are going to have a car crash at the city gates of Jerusalem this week. Some of you are in the same place in the race. Hope and despair are coming at each other. What's going to happen next? What's going to happen next is what you do with the word *therefore*. Remember how in chapter 12, it says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . ." That's called an application. When you see *therefore*, you say, "What's it there for?" It means I'm supposed to do something. Ray Johnson says, "But the next verse didn't say that I thought. 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . .'" He said, "I thought it would just say, 'Let us pray. Let us study the Bible. Let us give money to the poor.' But the writer startled us and said, 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.'" In other words, if we want to be spiritually healthy, if you want to run the race with God, then Job No. 1 is to let go of anything that hinders you, anything that has the power to kill hope or faith. God is saying, "If you want to be a person of hope, you have to let go of everything toxic."

I'd like us to do a toxicity check on our lives. That means I have to quit preaching and start meddling. Underneath each of the pews at the end of the row is a basket. Everybody at the end of the rows, pull out the basket, please, and take a pen. The ushers tried to give everyone here a bulletin, but if you don't have a bulletin, just grab a sheet of paper. We're going to do a hope checkup today to see how much hope is in our lives. In the Sermon Notes part of your bulletin, I'd like you to draw a line straight across. At one end put zero and at the other end, put 10. How much hope do you have today?

What I'd like to suggest is that if you are a 10, you are hope-filled. You are not hopeful; you are hope-filled. You are positive that you have won the lottery even though you did not buy a ticket. If you are a 1, you are discouraged. You are depressed. You are not at all surprised to find that the stupid pen they gave you doesn't work. Put an X on the line you drew, showing where you are today in terms of hope. Four to 6 is normal going into the race. Four, 5, 6, somewhere in there, is where we spend a lot of our time; 4 for those of you who are a little more conservative. If you are a 9 or a 10, please feel free to leave. You are doing fine and I don't have a lot to say to you. But if you are under 8.9 or a 9 or a 10 but have a friend who is hopeless, maybe you want to write down four words and see how they would affect the hope that God gives you for life.

I believe discouragement, that 0 to 5 part of the scale, has four keys. It is *universal*; everybody gets it. You don't have to write these down. Discouragement is a *repeating* disease. You'll catch it more than once. I wish discouragement was like chicken pox, get it once, done, but discouragement repeats as often as you are exposed. Discouragement is *deadly*. In other words, discouragement, hopeless people, makes life worse. And the fourth thing, discouragement is not only universal and repeated and deadly, it is *contagious* so let's find the things that kill our hope

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off

let us see

everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

There are millions of enemies of hope but here are four things that I would suggest hinder or entangle. Write down these four words and circle the one that you think applies to you. The first thing that I would suggest is *busyness*. Are you busy or are you still? We live in a microwave world. We are constantly on the treadmill. We get up. We go hard. We pursue all the good things of life and that's not bad. One of the things that I believe about everything that hinders is that these are not bad things. They just get in the way of the best things that God has for me and I'm so busy getting the good things, pursuing the good life, that they squeeze out the God life.

Part of the reason is that busy people lack perspective. The sort of turning-the-corner premier of Communist China was Zhou Enlai. He changed again what China would be like for our lifetimes. Once he was giving a press conference, very unusual, but the French ambassador was in town. One of the reporters said, "Mr. Premier, tell us, what do you think of the French Revolution?" trying to get China in trouble. Zhou Enlai stopped for a moment and then says, "I think it's too soon to tell." It's only been 200 years. *There* is perspective! There is somebody who says, "You cannot know how it's going unless you have perspective."

Jesus had perspective. All four of these sources of despair we are going to talk about are met by four sources of hope in Holy Week. It says here in the passage

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross . . . [Hebrews 12:1-2]

Jesus had perspective. He saw what was really there, even if it was on the other side of the trial and betrayal and the tomb. The joy was set before Him and He could focus His hope on that. I believe that one reason the Sabbath is in the top Ten Commandments of God is that you need to stop. You need to let God speak to you and say, "I know how you feel, but this is how you're real. I know how it's really going." One reason for the Sabbath is to get fresh eyesight, fresh perspective. Let me suggest that most of your life looks like this card [slide shown]. That's how you see life. You can't see what's coming. You sure hope that its dawn and not a train, but you can't tell. That is what worship does when you stop and are still. You don't scrub off the windshield and say, "God, where am I? God, what's next?" And it's not just coming to church. What if you say, "I come to church every week. I don't understand why I don't see this"? Well,

it's because except for 20 minutes a week, your life looks like this [slide shown]. Are you too busy to receive the hope that God offers you?

The second word I would write down, something I think robs people of hope, is *guilt*. People live in the past. They obsess either about their glory days, the good old days, or their failures. Jesus, again, shows how to get past guilt. This week He will be betrayed and slandered and crucified, but from the cross, He looks down and says, "Forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." He refuses to live in resentment and instead of heaping on guilt, He wants to offer grace. I believe that guilt and resentment kill hope.

I'm reminded of the story of two monks who have taken vows of silence and chastity and poverty. They are walking down the road to the monastery one evening and they come to a stream where there is a beautiful young woman who can't swim across. They stop, but they can't even talk to each other about this. Finally the older one picks the young woman up and carries her through the water across the stream. He sets her down and the two monks go on. Five miles later the young monk breaks his silence and says, "I can't believe you did that. You touched a woman. What were you thinking?" And the old monk said, "Well, brother, I put her down on the other side of the shore, but it sounds to me like you're still carrying her with you." That's what guilt and resentment do to hope. They carry it with us.

Jesus was not the only person who had a bad week. Peter had a bad week. He denied Jesus. Judas had a bad week. He betrayed Jesus. The difference in the faith of the two of them is that Judas allowed his fall to knock him out of the race. He ran away from the grace of God. Peter allowed himself to be picked up and receive grace that changed his future. Is guilt or resentment robbing you of hope? There are no fatal falls in the race unless we stay down.

The third thing I thought that becomes an enemy of hope, that hinders and entangles us, is the idea of *worry*. I think you are a bunch of worrywarts. I do. I think some of you have taken anxiety to a professional level. You are already thinking of new things to worry about that haven't even happened. Some of you have professional training, lawyers, in being professional worriers and it can seep into our souls. I've got to tell you, I think there is a difference between being stupid and being anxious. Jesus worried. This week shows us Jesus going to a place by Himself and He is so worried, so anxious, that He, literally, sweats blood, right? "Please, God, don't make this happen. Please. Is there any way that I don't have to do this?" Being worried is not the same as a life of anxiety.

If we were to ask you to mark on that same scale where you are between worry and peacefulness, where would you place the mark? Warren Wiersby says, "Most Christians are being crucified on a cross between two thieves: Yesterday's regret and tomorrow's worries." Is worry choking out the hope that you need to see the finish line? "Jesus promised His disciples three things—that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble."

The last thing I'm going to talk about that robs hope is *comparison*, the idea that you lose hope when you compare. By any measure of human existence, you are succeeding just by sitting here. No matter your age, you are part of the most blessed generation in the most blessed empire of human history and what robs you of hope is that you insist on comparing yourself to others. We live in a bigger, better, brighter, faster culture that does not do well with contentment. Jesus understood this that last week. He and his disciples are walking in and out of Jerusalem. They point to the temple and say, "Can you believe this? They don't have anything like this in

Nazareth. How come I can't build something like this in my backyard?" Jesus says, "In three days this will all be knocked down." This goes away. Brothers and sisters, don't compare to what goes away because comparison robs us of hope.

We live in a social media world. Not everybody. My 82-year-old mother-in-law, Jan Johansen, is having a little trouble getting into the digital world, but she signed up for Facebook a couple of years ago when she turned 80. It was great! She asked her sons and daughters to be her friends and they were all the friends she had for a long time, but Facebook actually sends notes out to people, "Please be Jan's friend. She doesn't have friends." Laura came home one day and said, "Mom, what's this?" She found that Jan had 100 friends she hadn't clicked on. "Oh, I don't want to bother them."

That sounds okay, but I know you've got a lot more friends than that. It came home to me when I started to do this stupid Twitter thing, all of human wisdom in 140 characters. But I've started to do it and I've got 400 followers. I feel like that's pretty good. I've even got my dog. I go to a conference on Thursday and Friday and sit down next to a good friend of mine. He says, "I saw your Tweet" but I knew he was not one of my 400. I say, "Oh, that's great. How're you doing?" He says, "Oh, I'm not doing very well, I've got like 40,000." I hated him, but he's an author. "Well, of course, you have 40,000." But he said, "I was talking to this guy," a mutual friend of ours, "and he has 667,000 followers." We both hated that other guy. And what made it worse is that my wife, who has started this great blog, has a friend who is a housewife, no advanced degrees, and she has 1 million followers. Unbelievable! Laura writes her little blog and says, "I think I'm going to burn this before I send it" because she is in danger of comparing herself. It did not help me much to realize that there are people on Twitter who have 8.7 million followers. They are actresses and I have a sense that instead of ideas being discussed, they are talking about the length of their legs. But we compare, and when we compare, we despair because there is always somebody better.

Where does life-giving, faith-sustaining hope come from in your darkest days? You will have dark days. You may be having one right now. Holy Week is a dark week. Where does faith and hope come from? When we've unwrapped, even for just a second, the sin that entangles and throw away the things that hinder and get up, we're ready to run the race, where does hope to finish the race come from? I think it starts with the idea that you stop and you listen, right? You have to stop instead of just running off. I want to say this in a non-sacrilegious fashion. Please, for the love of God, stop! For God's sake, stop! This week stop! I think the most ignored verse in the Bible is in Psalm 46.

¹⁰ He says, "Be still, and know that I am God

I think He is saying, "You cannot know that I am God unless you are still." You will find yourself refilled with hope when you are still long enough to see that we are meant to be running the race together.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . .

All those people who ran before us, all those people in this room who want to run with us, since we are surrounded by people who want to cheer us on and point us toward the detour, pick us up and set out a straight path, we will run with hope if we see that the key is

² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Not, fix your eyes on Jesus so you will run faster. Not, fix your eyes on Jesus so you will do better and be a better Christian. That is not how we have hope. We fix our eyes on Jesus, not to run faster, but to depend on Jesus. The apostle Paul doesn't call the people in house churches Christians. He calls them brothers and sisters in Christ. To be a Christian is to be in a club. To be in Christ means I am close to Christ. Christ is close to me. I can see Christ and I know Christ sees me. That gives hope. We have hope because God is having Christ do what we can never do, run with us, come back for us, run beside us, pick us up when we fall. Do you need that hope? Hebrews 11 and 12 are two of the great chapters of the Bible. They really are. They talk about hope but they talk about other stuff, too.

My daughter Katy does not think these are the best chapters of the Bible because of a verse that was taught in Sunday School, not one of these verses, but Hebrews 12:11. One day when she was a little girl and did something bad, Laura gave her a time-out. Katy was sitting on the steps and after about three minutes, Laura came out to her because she had sat there long enough. As she approaches, she hears Katy mumbling and she stops out of sight and listens. What Katy is mumbling is

¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

She didn't know what that meant, no discipline seems pleasant. Laura, bless her heart, was wise enough to hide her laughter and just turn around and thank God the child was learning something. I would not have done that. I am a pastor. I would have gone and sat next to her and ruined the whole moment by saying, "Oh, that's so true, Katy, but do you know what the best verse is? The best verse is what comes next."

¹² So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees.¹³ Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.

Take a new grip with your tired hands. In 1968 the Summer Olympics was in Mexico City. Because of the heat and especially because of the elevation, they ran the marathon late in the afternoon. It was so hot and so high, almost a third of the marathoners didn't even finish the race. World-class runners and almost a third did not finish.

Mamo Wolde from Ethiopia won the race in 2 hours and 7 minutes. They had the awards ceremony right afterwards to a full stadium. The sun goes down and 15 minutes later, the last runner is still on the course. He comes in sight of the stadium now in the dark. He has fallen; he is limping and is hurt. He is from Tanzania. His name is John Stephen Akhwari. Akhwari has no chance of winning. He is 40 minutes behind the runner in front of him. The sun had set and there were only a few thousand people left in the stadium. When the fans were told there was still one runner hobbling along the track, they rushed back to cheer him on. The stadium lights were turned on and Akhwari ran the last 800 meters to resounding applause. Afterwards he is interviewed and the interviewer says, "When you knew the race was over and you had lost, why did you ignore the advice to pull out and continue running?" Akhwari said, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race." That is hope!

That is a focus on why we run and where we go. This Holy Week King Jesus is waiting for you at the finish line and if you fall down, He'll come and get you. Let's pray.

Lord, I pray that my brothers and sisters here will look at those things they have circled that hinder and those sins that entangle and quench their hope, whether it is hurry or guilt or worry or comparison. I pray that they will not try harder, but look at You and say, "Lord Jesus, help me." I pray they will turn to You, the author and perfecter of our faith, and say, "Lord Jesus, pick me up. Give me hope to run. Give me hope to share. Bless me this Holy Week because You love me every day." Let us run with You. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A postscript from John Crosby:

"I'm encouraging our congregation to get and read The Hope Quotient by Ray Johnston (available in our bookstore). The overarching theme of the series and many of the illustrations are found in there; solo deo Gloria!"