

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
7th July 2019 – Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

Faith Hope and Love Last Forever

Text: There are three things that last forever, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love!
St. Paul

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas once wrote a poem on Death. We began the Easter service here at New St. James with its opening line:

“And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;

Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.”

According to the mighty prologue to the Gospel of St John the universe was created by the power of thought and not the other way around. According to Scripture ultimately everything obeys the power of Divine Mind. That is why it is intimately connected to three things for which nothing is impossible: Faith, Hope and Love.

St Mark says of Faith: “If you can believe, all things are possible to the person that believes.”

St Paul says of hope that “Abraham against Hope believed in hope and thus became the Father of many nations, because God makes alive the dead by calling things into being that were not.”

Writing to the church in Corinth St Paul says: “Love hopes all things. Love never comes to an end.”

Somehow, and there is deep mystery here, these three forces of Faith hope and love are the life bringing forces of the universe. Nothing is impossible for them. They are forces in the mind of God and the Divine mind is Loving. They are thus the forces behind in, through and under the whole universe.

What happens at our death? Dr. Wayne Dyer used to believe that life ended at death. At that time this is what he wrote, and it is a commonly held view today. He said: “Look over your shoulder. You will notice a constant companion. For want of a better name, call him your own death. You can fear this visitor or use him for your own personal gain...With death so endless a proposition and life so breathtakingly brief, ask yourself, should I avoid doing the things I really want to do? Ask yourself How long am I going to be dead? It's your life: do with it what you want.”

Elizabeth Kubler Ross writing her best seller *On Death and Dying* said: "In the old days people seemed to believe in God unquestionably; they believed in a hereafter, which was to relieve people of their suffering and pain. There was a reward in Heaven, and if we had suffered much here on earth, we would be rewarded after death depending on the courage and grace, patience and dignity with which we had carried our burden."

But today for many people suffering has lost its meaning and with this change fewer people believe in life after death. She says that if we only go to church for social reasons then we have deprived the church of its former purpose, "namely to give hope, a purpose to our tragedies here on earth and an attempt to understand and bring meaning to otherwise unacceptable painful occurrences in our life."

One of the sad casualties of the loss of this idea of life after death is that people have no real or lasting permanent Hope. So, people despair more easily. That rebounds into physical distress, sickness, use of medications, visits to the mental health ward and sometimes ends in suicide.

There are so many voices out there in the world. Can I counsel us to heed the ones today that are full of Hope: that there is life after death, that suffering can lead to reward and that these beliefs result in wellbeing?

Let's for just a moment take an experimental view of human nature. We know for certain that when a patient who is terminal loses hope that they usually die very quickly. We also know that people who have faith frequently are able to hang onto life in a manner that surprises their doctors and close friends. Why are they able to do this?

Let's go further. We know that stress can put us in the hospital with high blood pressure or ulcers or stroke. Now consider the modern view that death is final. The result? Anxiety about dying increases. Death itself becomes a dirty word and we avoid even talking about this reality. I believe that all our negative thinking, stress, and the physical changes that occur in our bodies can somehow be traced back to our fear of death. We develop failure, we get down on ourselves and get deeply depressed and guess who shows up grinning at us over our own shoulders? Our own Death!

But why does negative thinking, anxiety, distress put us in the hospital or on tranquilizers? Why isn't negative stress healthy for us? Why don't young plants thrive on battery acid? Why don't our lungs thrive on smoke? Or our livers on alcohol?

Because we are not built that way. We were not built for negative thinking or anxiety. We were built to operate on the high octane of Faith, hope and love. Faith hope and love fuel our growth. If these three are largely absent in our lives, we will slowly die.

A couple came in to see a Pastor. The wife in the couple was a writer and was deathly sick. The husband was full of stress and anger. Neither believed in God. They were trying out a pastor as a last resort. The pastor listened and said; You know I could help you, but I am afraid that you probably consider yourself too sophisticated to listen to what I have to say. The man said "no." He was desperate. He had tried everything. So, the Pastor gave him a prescription. He was to read the Bible to his wife and pick out and memorize verses of Faith, Hope and Love.

Within six months this brilliant man's life was changed. He now felt immensely well. His wife fully recovered, and the world came alive for them. Why did this happen? He set the three Graces Faith, Hope and Love to work for him and permit them to shape his view of the world. And they were both healed.

You know you could just listen to this as part of the sermon and let it go. But how about it? How about reading the Bible like this and memorizing the verses of the three Graces? How about starting tonight before we go to bed?

Dr. Ian Gunn Russell was a Christian who believed that the miracles of the Bible were real but confined to the time of Jesus. The theology he had been taught was that miracles were used by Jesus to authenticate his ministry. They were basically over, however. He believed that the medical treatments he dispensed would be the same if he were an atheist or a Christian.

But one day he received a call to treat a man because the man had heard that he was a Christian. Nothing could convince the patient that he should go to a hospital. So, Dr. Russell went to see him and set up a care procedure. He set up a night nurse, intravenous drugs for his heart and asthma and penicillin for his pneumonia.

After he had treated him something nagged at Russell. He heard the patient's wife over and over again in his brain: "He only let me call you because you were a Christian." A little voice inside said to Russell you could pray for him to be healed. But that was absolutely foreign to Dr. Russell. "Sure, St Peter healed a lame beggar, but penicillin is enough for me!" said Russell.

The following day it became clear that penicillin was not enough. The patient's blood reports came back worse and worse. Dr. Russell consulted with another doctor and they examined the patient together. The other doctor said: "You are doing everything possible Ian, I know, but your patient is going to die!"

The following morning there was more bad news. The patient's breathing was becoming more and more labored. It was obvious that the patient would soon be gone. Russell suddenly found himself talking to God. "Why can't I help him?" he said. And the small voice inside said "You can pray for him to be healed." Gandhi once said: "The only tyrant I accept in this world is the still small voice within me."

Russell suddenly obeyed: "Lord," he said "I don't believe he should die right now. Please heal him."

When the wife and daughter came into the room Russell said: "I have done all I can!" And this time he had!

Hour by hour the patient began to improve, to the amazement of his doctors and the family. He soon was discharged from hospital and lived for another fifteen years.

Let's note the three Graces at work here in Russell's care procedure. He had enough *love* to put himself out for a man who feared hospitals he *hoped* when the odds were stacked against him, he added *faith* in God to his practice of medicine

G.A. Studdard Kennedy wrote this about faith: "I must have God. This life is too dull without, too dull for anything but suicide.

G. K Chesterton wrote about hope: Hope means expectancy when things are otherwise hopeless.

The monk Thomas A. Kempis wrote this of Love:

"Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of trouble, attempts what is above its strength, pleads no excuse of impossibility, for it thinks all things are lawful for itself, and all thing possible. It is therefore able to undertake all things, and warrants them to take effect, where he who does not love, would faint and lie down."

Two thousand years ago now, love triumphed over death The iron band that hung around our existence was broken by God's action to raise Jesus from the dead. And it was broken forever.

I know, no matter what our problems are today that the Source of the stream that can heal our dried-up souls began at this man's empty tomb.

Have we lost a relative to Alzheimer's? Someone once came to me and said; "David, my best friend has Alzheimer's. Today for the first time she didn't know me. We were children together, spent all our lives together. Today we are strangers. She broke off and began to sob.

Hear Dylan's Thomas' faith.

Though they go mad, they shall be sane!

I have a good friend who watched the love of his life die in Hospital. He was there on the day she died. As he watched the life ebb from her, he picked up her long slender and very beautiful fingers. Her eyes flickered open, there was a slight smile for him on her lips and then she was gone.

Hear Dylan's Thomas's hope:

Though lovers be lost, love shall not!

Whatever problems we are dealing with today, under which we are slowly sinking, why don't we grasp the lifeline of faith and hope and love and believe with Dylan Thomas that:

Though we sink through the sea, we shall rise again.

And Death shall have no dominion,

Dead men naked they shall be one,

With the man in the wind and the west moon,

When their bores are picked clean and the clean bones gone

They shall have stars at elbow and foot;

Though they go mad they shall be sane,

Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;

Though Lovers be lost, Love shall not,

And death shall have no dominion.