

“Groaning for Resurrection”
Romans 8:18-34
April 12, 2020 (Easter 2020)
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

Our Scripture text this morning is from Romans chapter eight, verses eighteen through thirty-four.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Rome about the struggles they face and how Christ relates to those struggles.

With that in mind, please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{8:18} For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

[...]

This is an odd Easter.

We should begin with that.

Normally it is a time for gatherings. Church congregations gather together. Families and communities gather for festivities and celebrations that are both religious and secular. It's a time characterized by togetherness.

But not this year. This year, churches are empty. This year, households are on their own. This year there are no church gatherings. What is supposed to be a time of gathered celebration is instead a time of somber separation.

And of course, that is only the beginning of how things are different this year. At the root of that change is the virus that is spreading around the world. While some will get minor symptoms, others will get much more unpleasant symptoms, while others will experience a sickness severe enough for hospitalization, and still others will die. At least 100,000 people are dead from this virus around the world so far ... and in many parts of the world it has only just begun.

And so, people are scared. And people are dying. And people are grieving. And healthcare systems are in danger of being overrun, and we are scared to get within six feet of other human beings. And this is life right now.

Things are not the way they are supposed to be. And many of us find ourselves grieving ... and groaning ... and longing for things to be different.

In many ways this is an unusual time ... and at the same time, sickness, pain, and death are of course not new.

Many of you have experienced them in a variety of ways. We had two church members rushed to the emergency room this week for things not at all related to the pandemic. And, of course, we have people like Steele, who have known pain and health struggles from the very beginning of their lives.

And as we consider the ways that sickness, pain, and death seem to reign over this world and this life – the ways they loom threateningly here or there – the ways they lurk in the corners of our lives – the ways they can snatch up those we love – as we consider the ways sickness, pain, and death affect us and this world, we can easily find ourselves struggling with the gut conviction that things in this world are not the way they are supposed to be. And we can find ourselves grieving ... and groaning ... and longing for things to be different.

But it's not limited to our health and wellbeing. We see it in other areas of life as well.

We see it in our relationships. I know I see it especially on social media right now. Our newsfeeds fill up with articles on blame. Who is to blame for this problem? Who is to blame for that problem? Who will be to blame if this other problem ever emerges? Who should we blame for all the blaming going on in our culture today? And accusations just fly across the internet and across the world.

Across cultural divides, across religious divides, across political divides, across national divides, everyone seems to be proclaiming who is to blame – everyone seems to be declaring who should pay – who should be punished.

And the accusations go in every direction. And the ones making the claims can seem to live in completely different worlds, and you wonder if they can agree on anything. But as I thought about it this week, what struck me was that across the board, in every demographic, everywhere on the political spectrum, in every cultural tribe, everyone seems to agree on at least one thing: that this world, and that our societies in this world, are not the way they're supposed to be.

Everyone seems to agree on that. Everyone seems to agree that society is broken. Everyone seems to agree that our world is damaged. They may enthusiastically disagree about who broke it, but they all agree it is broken.

And many people seem angry about it ... and everyone on some level seems to be grieving, and groaning, and longing for things to be different.

And it comes closer to home too. We see it in our relationships – as friendships gather tension ... as families become weighed down with bitterness ... as relationships fall and shatter.

And we're usually pretty good at spotting ways that this is other people's fault – we're good at identifying what wrongs others have done to us – but the truth is that we, of course, are not innocent in all this.

Though we try to turn our eyes from it, we know we have hurt others. We know we have wounded others. We know that we have contributed to their brokenness.

And we know we have contributed to our own as well.

Each of us have a picture of who we want to be ... of what we want to do ... of the quality of person we want to live as ... but we never seem to make it there. We disappoint ourselves again and again. And maybe we get mad. Or maybe we get depressed. Or maybe we try to drown out the accusatory voices in our head with distractions or reassurances.

But we look at ourselves, and we know – we know it in our hearts – we know it in our guts – that *we* are not the way we are supposed to be either. And sometimes, when we admit that fact to ourselves, we find ourselves grieving ... and groaning ... and longing to be different.

We see it in the frailty of our bodies. We see it in the world around us. We see it in our relationships. We see it in our own hearts. Things are not the way they are supposed to be.

And that is what the Apostle Paul points to first in our text this morning. That this world is not the way it is supposed to be – and so we grieve, and we groan, and we long for something different.

The Apostle Paul says that people – and he says this is especially true of people who are particularly aware of their own hearts, by the help of God – that people groan inwardly, and long

for things to be different. We see that in verse twenty-three. We see it again in verses twenty-six and twenty-seven.

It's true on a personal level, but it's also true on a relational level. While the passage we have read this morning focuses on the individual heart, the Apostle Paul spends much of this letter to the Romans addressing problems: pain, brokenness, and sin at work within relationships and communities.

Paul is no stranger to the groaning in our hearts or in our communities – he points to it here and he names it.

But he also goes a step further. He says that the problem is not just present in us, as human beings – but it's a problem that has spread throughout creation. It's a problem in our world. It's a problem in our bodies. "Creation," he writes in verse nineteen, "waits with eager longing." "The whole creation," he writes in verse twenty-two, "has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." All of creation, he writes in verses twenty and twenty-one, is in bondage to corruption, and has been subjected to futility.

Here in the Bible, the Apostle Paul names what we all feel. The whole world – from the place we live to the communities we form – from the cells of our bodies to the secret thoughts of our hearts – the whole world is not the way it is supposed to do. It is subject to futility. It is in bondage to corruption. And we groan and long for something different.

Don't you feel that way? Do you feel it as you look at your life? Do you feel it as you look in your heart? Do you feel it as you read the news these days? Do you feel it as you hear from people who have struggled with sickness and pain?

The Apostle Paul names what we all feel. This world is broken. And we long for it to be different.

But what, then, are we supposed to do with that?

How are we supposed to respond to it?

Well ... there are a few options for how we tend to respond.

One is the response of optimism. This is the perspective that we can handle the brokenness of this life – that we can overcome, manage, or just ignore those areas where things are not the way they are supposed to be.

The most ambitious and idealistic version of this is the hope that we can overcome the brokenness in this life.

We see this, first, in how we tend to respond to nature in the modern world. We believe that if we are clever enough, if we have just the right kind of technology, if we work hard enough and are scientific enough, then we can overcome all there is about the natural world that is not as we think it should be – then we can overcome sickness, we can overcome want, we can overcome pain, we can maybe even one day overcome death.

Of course there's nothing like a global pandemic to disrupt that kind of idealism. As Ross Douthat pointed out in a recent op-ed in *The New York Times*, this pandemic has in many ways exposed the limits of our experts in our culture. He explains how the institutions that are to be most dedicated to science and medicine have, on more than one occasion, gotten things wrong, or had to reverse their advice. And even now, a lot remains that is not understood or for which there is no plan. Our experts are not as all-knowing as we might like to think. And neither are they all-powerful.

Nicholas Kristof, another *New York Times* columnist, had a jarring op-ed yesterday, along with a video from two days he spent in the COVID-19 units of two hospitals in the Bronx, in New York.

And what you're struck by as you consider the work of our public health institutions, and the work going on in the hospitals in places like New York City, is that there are dedicated people, at the top of their field, working as hard as they can ... but they cannot overcome this crisis at will. The experts cannot, at the drop of a hat, master a cure to this virus before anyone dies – the doctors, for all their dedication, for all their sacrifice, simply cannot save many of the patients who come in their doors.

For all our technology, for all our skill and commitment ... we cannot overcome the brokenness of this world ... and instead we find ourselves groaning and longing for things to be different.

And we see the same pattern in other areas of life. Our attempts to overcome all brokenness in our social lives are met with similar disappointments. Despite all our dreams of social harmony, no one has gotten there yet. And many who have tried have created more brokenness in the world than they have solved. And on a more relational level, experience shows time and time again how often it is those who are committed to overcoming all the brokenness in their relationships – who are committed to fixing everything wrong with those around them – who strive to have or to make the perfect friends, the perfect spouse, the perfect children ... they are far more likely to destroy those relationships than to perfect them. They cannot overcome the brokenness in their relationships.

And neither can we overcome the brokenness in our hearts. Of course we often try. We may read an inspiring book, we may come up with an inspiring plan ... we may declare to everyone about the new life we plan to live ... but it always seems to fall flat. And we live lives that flip back and forth between idealistic expectations for ourselves and hopeless despair.

Some of us try to overcome by ourselves the brokenness in this world and in our lives ... but when we do, we see how we fall short. We cannot overcome it. And we find ourselves groaning, and longing for something different.

And so many of us shift to just trying to manage the brokenness – to manage the darkness. We focus on what can be done, and we tell ourselves that that will be sufficient. And while that is a more realistic approach than the last one ... it is not particularly satisfying in the end either.

Consider Steele Funches, whose testimony we heard just a few minutes ago. Steele's story is a marvel of medical technology. His condition cannot be eliminated, but it is amazing how it has

been managed by dedicated medical experts. Steele has had seventeen surgeries among other procedures which have saved his life and managed his condition. It's an amazing testimony to what modern medicine can do.

But as amazing as it is ... the solutions he has right now are not the solutions we (or he) really long for. No one wants to see their sixteen-month-old in surgery. No one wants to have their teenage son's skull removed and expanded. These procedures are an incredible gift – they are a real blessing – but they are not the wholeness that we long for. When we groan for something different from the brokenness of this world – it is not management of the brokenness we long for, but a cure.

And so it is as we face not only the physical challenges of this life, but the social and the spiritual.

As we try to manage the difficulties in relationships, our interactions soon become like driving on a severely damaged road, swerving back and forth to avoid one pothole after another. And soon we find ourselves focusing more on management than on the relationship itself.

And as we try to manage the selfishness in our hearts, we soon find that it is not so keen on being managed. While we try to pen it up and contain it to one section of our hearts and actions, it soon bursts out of its pen – showing up somewhere new, causing more damage in our lives.

The second form of optimism is to try to simply manage the brokenness in us and around us. But this too falls short. And when it does, we find ourselves groaning, and longing for something different.

So for a third option, we may just try to ignore the brokenness. We just don't look at it. We just focus on the positive.

I worked for a number of years, while I was in seminary, as a caregiver on the memory floor of an assisted living facility. I was mostly a caregiver, but I also got to spend some time leading group activities. And one popular group activity we would do, and that I would lead, would be group sing-a-longs. We sang together a lot of songs from the first half of the twentieth century.

And a lot of the songs I became more familiar with at that care facility summed up this approach really well.

I remember, for example, the song “Look for the Silver Lining”:

Look for the silver lining
Whenever a cloud appears in the blue;
Remember, somewhere the sun is shining,
And so the right thing to do is make it shine for you.
A heart full of joy and gladness
Will always banish sadness and strife—
So always look for the silver lining,
And try to find the sunny side of life.

Now ... of course, some of us can have a habit of only seeing the negative, and we do need to look for the silver lining.

So this song could make a good correction. But it makes a pretty bad overall philosophy of life.

“Sure, there are clouds,” it says, “sure there is darkness – but as long as there is good somewhere, just focus on that, and banish the thoughts of darkness from your mind.”

A more well-known song with a similar sentiment might be “Keep on the Sunny Side”:

Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side,
Keep on the sunny side of life;
It will help us every day, it will brighten all the way,
If we keep on the sunny side of life.

One of the best unmaskings of this approach I’ve ever seen was in a movie I saw many years ago, which I *am not* recommending to you, for a number of reasons.

It’s a comedy which follows the fictional life of a man in the first century living a life parallel to Jesus. I don’t remember most of it that well, but if my memory serves correctly, it makes light of or blasphemously mocks a number of scenes from Christ’s life. But there is one scene, towards the end, that always stuck with me. In it, the main character, along with a number of other men, are nailed to crosses on a hillside. And they are waiting to die. And there seems to be no hope. And one of them is distressed. And the man on the cross next to him tells him not to be down, but to focus on the positive. And with that, he breaks into an upbeat song about always looking on the bright side of life. By the end of the scene, all the men on crosses are singing and whistling along.

Now, of course, there’s a way to look at this scene as a simple mockery of crucifixion. But as flippant as it is, that doesn’t seem to me to be the point. It seems to me that the point is – or it seems to me at least that the point should be – to mock such a sing-song-y approach to life.

Because in the face of something like Roman crucifixion, a look-for-the-silver-lining approach to life is absurd.

In the face of overrun hospitals in the Bronx, a keep-on-the-sunny-side-of-life outlook is an insult.

In the face of the brokenness in our relationships, in our communities, in our societies, and in our own hearts, a rose-colored-glasses approach to life is a lie.

And Biblical Christianity will have none of it. The Apostle Paul will certainly not put up with it in our passage this morning. Yes, creation is amazing. Yes, people are a wonder. Paul affirms that. But the brokenness is real. The damage is real. The sin and selfishness are real. And we cannot overcome it, manage it, or ignore it. Paul forces us here to look at it – he demands that we acknowledge it.

And how could he not? Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. And at the heart of his proclamation was the fact that when God came to this earth – when God showed up, and spoke the truth to his

people – when God came and offered human beings grace, mercy, and a relationship with him – when God came out of love to be with us – humanity’s response was to kill him. God came to us in love, and our response was to murder him.

We can’t overcome that kind of evil by being clever. We can’t manage that level of darkness. We can’t ignore that big of a problem. It is real. And it dominates our world – from our societies, to our cells, to our souls.

And that fact leads many to abandon the optimistic approach for the pessimistic one.

This is the second response to the problems we face, and this can take spiritual or materialistic forms.

The spiritual approach is to admit that things are not the way they are supposed to be, and then to just write this world off. It concludes that we belong in a different kind of world. And it might hold out hope or present a plan for how to get there. But either way, it writes this world off – and much that goes with it.

Maybe it focuses especially on the physical world as our enemy – as a hindrance to the spiritual. Maybe it focuses on our bodies as being what is bad: as being a prison that holds us back from more spiritual pursuits. Maybe it looks at society as a whole as the problem, and it romanticizes solitude.

Of course, each of those perspectives leads to another question, which is: if we do not belong here, then how did we get here? Who put us here? Why the mismatch? What cruel or incompetent being placed us in a world or in a body or in social relationships that we were not made for? A range of answers have been given throughout history ... but they are not usually very satisfying.

That is the spiritual version of the pessimistic perspective. But far more common in our culture is the materialistic version of the pessimistic perspective.

This view says that the universe is an accident, that time and chance have created all that is, that the world is the way it is – and we may not like some parts of it ... but this is what *is*. We may want – we may long for – something different, but that’s not what is, and so we need to grow up and accept our lot ... make the best of our time here, and then that’s that.

In other words, though we may feel, in all sorts of areas of life, that this world is *not* the way it’s supposed to be, this perspective would say: *actually*, this world *is* the way it’s supposed to be ... and our job is to accept it and make the most of it.

Which raises the question: If this world is all there is ... and if we are a part of this world ... if we are evolved and adapted to live this world ... then why do we long for something else?

C.S. Lewis makes this point in his book, *Mere Christianity*. He writes: “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exist. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. [A man feels] sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex.” [Lewis, 121]

The list can go on. We can go throughout creation and see that each creature has longings, and there is something to satisfy them. If that is the case, then what on earth is wrong with human beings?

We long for something we do not see, and we cannot seem to find. We long for a world of joy and harmony, free of disease, pain, and death. We long for relationships of love and peace. We long to be the kind of people who love others and pursue what is good. We long for something greater than ourselves. We long for what does not appear to exist.

But how can that be? A creature may not be able to lay hold of what they long for: a baby can be deprived of food, a duck of water, a person of sex. That of course is true. But how much stranger would it be if babies were hungry, but born into a world where food did not exist – if ducklings longed to swim but lived in a world where water did not exist – if humans desired sex, but lived in a sex-less world?

But this is one of the questions for the materialist. We seem ill-suited for this world. We long for peace, we long for wholeness, we long for eternity. How could this be? Where does this come from, if we are merely creatures made by and for a world characterized by conflict, by brokenness, and by death?

Our world, our communities, our own hearts, seem foreign to us. How can this be? Why do we grieve, if this is where we belong? Why do we groan, if this is what we are made for? Why do we long for something else, if this is our true home?

In a radio interview, the theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbigin was asked: “Are you an optimist or a pessimist?” His answer was: “I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.”

Paul’s answer, the Bible’s answer, is to tell us the story of our world – and the story of our hearts. And at the center of that story is what we celebrate this morning: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells us that the things we long for, the things we groan for in our hearts – these are not illusions, they are not fairy tales, but they are what we are made for. They are our heart’s true home.

The Bible tells us that in the beginning, God made all things. And he made them good. He made them perfect. He made them free from all the stains that mar them today. The world was free from sickness, pain, and death. The world was free from sinfulness, selfishness, and evil. The world was not subject to futility, but it fulfilled its purpose of pointing to and glorifying God, its Maker.

It was a world not so different from what Steele Funches imagined as heaven, just a little while ago.

And the pinnacle of creation was humanity: man and woman, made in the image of God. God created all he made out of the overflow of his love, out of delight and a desire to give good gifts –

and he made man and woman to reflect that same overflowing love. Human relationships were characterized by intimacy, love, grace, and peace. Human hearts were focused on loving others and glorifying God. And all of creation – every cell, every society, and every soul – was in perfect harmony with the infinite God who made them. And it was good.

This is the world we were made for. This is the world we long for. This is the world we now groan for.

But then, our first parents rebelled. They chose to break from the harmony with our Maker. They chose to strike out on their own and reject God's loving rule over them. And as they did, sin, brokenness, and futility soon invaded every part of life.

Their hearts turned in on themselves, and they became captives to selfishness. Their relationships became broken as they put themselves first and began to see others as either objects or obstacles. Creation became subject to futility and sickness. Pain and death took hold. The world God made became disfigured.

And yet still, God left in us – he left in all of creation – a memory of what was ... a memory of who we were made to be and what we were made for.

So that even as we made our new world in our new broken image, we longed for something else – we groaned for a different world, and we grieved for the loss of something we could not quite remember.

God left us with a longing ... and then, in the fullness of time, God invaded his world, and began his work of restoration.

Jesus Christ, God himself – God the Son – entered the world as a man. He invaded this world, in order to make it new.

But to do that, he had to go to the heart of the problem. And so, Jesus came to the world dominated by sin, death, and brokenness, and he gave himself over to sin, death, and brokenness. He dove into its heart – he entered into the depths of our despair.

And so Jesus Christ gave himself over to death on the cross. And that death was not just a painful physical experience. It was God the Son taking onto himself all that had marred his creatures and his creation.

On the cross, Jesus took onto himself the sin of his people – all their guilt, all their shame, all the ugliness of their hearts; he took all the brokenness of this world, all that is subject to futility. On the cross Jesus Christ took death itself onto himself – and he put it all to death. Through the cross, Jesus defeated all that our first parents had invited into this world, so that those things would have no more power before him.

And taking those things to himself, Jesus died on the cross. And he was put in the tomb.

And on the third day, he rose again. And when Jesus rose from the dead it was not just a vindication of Jesus, it was not just a victory for Jesus over his own death, it was not just a confirmation of Jesus's power, though it was all those things – but when Jesus rose from the dead, it was the turning point of all of history. From there God began to make all things new. And rooted in Christ's resurrection was the promise that God would bring his work to completion. In Jesus's resurrection we get a foretaste of what God will do for all of creation.

Jesus Christ has risen, and now he makes our hearts new, if we give ourselves to him. He will make our hearts right, and on the last day he will cleanse them of sin forever – but even now, if we place our trust in him, he will begin, in this life, to put sin in our hearts to death, and to bring faith, hope, and love to life through the power of his resurrection.

Jesus Christ is risen, and now he makes our relationships new. Peace and harmony will cover the earth at his return, but even now he is making relationships new in his household, the Church.

Jesus Christ is risen, and now he will make this whole world new. For on the last day, when Christ returns to this world, to reign over it as king, he will wipe away all that is broken, all that is wrong, all that is sad, and restore his creation to what it was meant to be from the beginning.

All of this is rooted in the resurrection of Christ.

And so it's key for us to appreciate that Christ's resurrection is not merely a happy metaphor or a great aspiration. To reduce Jesus's resurrection to a mere metaphor or aspiration is to return to the empty optimism we spoke of moments ago.

Jesus Christ rose from the grave in history. He rose bodily. And he actually reigns in heaven right now. It is objective truth. It is true truth. And because it is true, all that he has promised – to make his people new, to make communities new, to make this world new – all of it is now guaranteed, for Christ has purchased it with his blood on the cross, and he has irreversibly begun his work of restoration in his resurrection.

And this is another reason why both the pessimist and the optimist fall short. Apart from the grace of God, things are far worse than the pessimist ever dared imagine. And with the grace of God through, the resurrection of Christ, things are far better than the optimist ever dared hope.

This is the proclamation of the gospel.

This is the proclamation of the resurrection.

This is the proclamation of Easter.

The question that's left is, where will you be in relationship to it?

The Bible tells us that some – even as they groan along with all of creation, even as they long for something else – some will refuse to be a part of this work of Christ. Some will not receive it as a gift, but will refuse it. Some will come to love the sin and the selfishness in their hearts so much that they will refuse to receive the remedy. Some will, like Adam and Eve, long so much for their

own independence from their Maker, that they will continue the rebellion, even as the world that that rebellion made crumbles around them. Some will do that.

Others will turn to Christ and live – both now and forever.

Christ, this morning, by his Spirit, through his word, urges you to come to him and to live: to join Steele and many others who have given up on their attempts to overcome, to manage, or to ignore the brokenness of this world – who have refused to give up the hope of the memory of paradise that still echoes in our hearts – and who have therefore turned to Christ in faith and hope and love.

This is the offer of the gospel. This is the proclamation of Easter.

Our spirits may grieve, and our hearts may groan, and our souls may long for something more.

But Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

And so, let us place our trust in him.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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