

New birth into a living hope through the resurrection... I don't know about you, but I surely could use a new birth into a living hope. The bad news of this world has been drummed into all of us. How many times have we seen the video of that police officer in South Carolina shooting the man running from him? How many words have we heard about violence in Africa and the Middle East, and threatened violence in our country? Politics rages as the various factions try to discredit other candidates or to destroy legislation. Folks have trouble getting their taxes done, houses catch on fire. And innocent people get hurt or sick and die every day. The bad news can seem too overwhelming!

In the face of all the bad news we've absorbed this week, I want to share with you a neat story that was first shared with me by a man who was a member of the Southington church I pastored. It's been passed around on the Internet; it is titled, "Other Worlds to Sing In."

Here's the story: 'When I was quite young, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember well the polished old case fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother used to talk to it. Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person -her name was "Information Please" and there was nothing she did not know. "Information Please" could supply anybody's number and the correct time.

'My first personal experience with this genie-in-the-bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn't seem to be any reason to cry because there was no one home to give sympathy. I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway. The telephone! Quickly I ran for the footstool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver in the parlor and held it to my ear. "Information Please," I said into the mouthpiece just above my head.

'A click or two and a small, clear voice spoke into my ear. "Information." "I hurt my finger. . ." I wailed into the phone. The tears came readily enough now that I had an audience. "Isn't your mother home?" came the question. "Nobody's home but me," I blubbered. "Are you bleeding?" "No," I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts." "Can you open your icebox?" she asked. I said I could. "Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it to your finger," said the voice. After that, I called "Information Please" for everything. I asked her for help with my geography, and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math. She told me my pet chipmunk that I had caught in the park just the day before would eat fruits and nuts.

'Then, there was the time Pete, our pet canary, died. I called "Information Please" and told her the sad story. She listened, then said the usual things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was unconsolated. I asked her, "Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?" She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, "Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow I felt better.

‘Another day I was on the telephone. "Information Please." "Information," said the now familiar voice. "How do you spell 'fix'?" I asked. All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest.

‘When I was 9 years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much. "Information Please" belonged in that old wooden box back home, and I somehow never thought of trying the tall, shiny new phone that sat on the table in the hall. As I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me. Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity, I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

‘A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about half an hour or so between planes. I spent 15 minutes or so on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "Information Please." Miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well, "Information." I hadn't planned this but I heard myself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell fix?" There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now." I laughed. "So it's really still you," I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time."

"I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children, and I used to look forward to them." I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister.

"Please do, she said. "Just ask for Sally." Three months later I was back in Seattle. A different voice answered "Information." I asked for Sally. "Are you a friend?" She said.

"Yes, a very old and dear friend," I answered. "Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally had been working part-time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago."

Before I could hang up she said, "Wait a minute. Did you say your name was Paul?" "Yes."

"Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you. The note said, 'Tell him I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean.'" I thanked her and hung up. I knew what Sally meant. (end of story)

There are other worlds in which to sing. That's the Christian hope... Even so, every time the calendar comes around to Easter, and every time we or someone we love faces death, we are forced to re-examine this belief.

When someone we love dies, death becomes intensely personal. The questions about what happens after life as we know it ends become significant. Every time we stand at graveside, our hearts wrestle with what we believe about the "other worlds in which to sing."

God understands that we tend to be like Thomas: we need help believing. When I was young I used to

ride horses, often bareback. Sometimes if the horse happened to be a particularly large one, I couldn't get on it by myself... I'd have to ask for a "leg-up," or a boost up. It didn't take a lot of help; just a little lift under the rider-to-be's bent shin... A boost up.

The Gospel of John is one of God's "boosts" for our faith, to help us when we can't quite believe on our own. We need something we can touch or see or hear. Last week's lesson from Luke had the disciples unable to believe the women when they reported the empty tomb... They thought the women were telling "an idle tale." And today we are given the Gospel of John's story of Thomas, who couldn't believe until he actually touched the wounds of his risen Lord.

There are a couple of things to keep in mind about the Gospel lesson for today. The group of disciples was hiding behind locked doors, because they were afraid that someone might figure out their connection to Jesus and kill them, too. They saw nothing to celebrate. They had let Jesus down, they had run away from him in his time of trouble. Now he had been killed, and even in the face of the empty grave they could only hide.

Suddenly Jesus appeared to them and offered them peace. We are told that he then BREATHED on them and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. You may remember how when God created human beings in the Book of Genesis, God formed them out of the dust, and then BREATHED on them to bring them to life. Jesus breathed renewed life - God's Holy Spirit - into the disciples and then gave them work to do, the work of forgiveness, the very work Jesus himself came to perform on earth.

The other thing to keep in mind is church. Preacher/professor William Willimon talked about various churches in which he has guest-preached over the years, some large, some tiny... His own church before he became a Bishop had a huge membership and a 100-member choir and four pipe organs.. It was a successful, impressive church.

Lots of books have been written by pastors who have had successful churches, books to tell you just what a congregation needs to have in order to attract folks: large parking lots, friendliness, all the "right" ingredients, diverse programs, great music. But think about it: Today's gospel lesson gives us a picture of a church that has no pipe organ, not even a piano; no choir, no pastor. In fact, suggested William Willimon, "It's a picture of the church at its worst, the first miserable little conglomeration ever to take upon itself the name 'church.'" There they were, cowering... (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, 4/99) They did not have a living hope.

So the first little church, that little group of frightened, failed disciples, had absolutely nothing going for it except for the presence of the Risen, Living Jesus Christ. That same Risen Christ with us today is finally the only thing WE have going for us, too. For Jesus Christ offers us forgiveness, and breathes life into us, and calls us to love God and to love others. The Risen Christ in our midst is the only reason we are a church. (pause)

Our world is frightened and full of things which speak only of death. As a church, we are to speak words of hope and love, and we CAN, because we are promised that we may risk living boldly here and now, because there are - thank God! - other worlds in which we will sing.

We have locked doors and fears enough for everybody. Life throws some really mean curve balls at us sometimes. But we are a church, people who are called to a living hope by the God who made us and loves us. We are blessed, for the very One in whom we struggle to believe has given us a boost up: the story of Thomas, and even more, the *right-now* presence of the living Lord. He alone can breathe peace and possibility into your life.

Let us pray: O God, you know where our belief falters and where we are frail as Christ's followers. Right now, please give each of us a faith-boost as we need it; breathe new life into our hearts. Grant us a fresh sense of the Risen Christ among us, that we may have new determination to be about his work in the world. We pray as Jesus' church. Amen.

Now we will sing a song some of you may have heard over the years,
“Every Morning Is Easter Morning.” The essence of this song is GOOD [NEWS](#):
God is in charge, spread the word!! The words for this song should be on the insert in the bulletins. I pray that it will give us all a BOOST in our ability to receive God’s LIVING HOPE.