

“But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.”

As I read through the Scripture passages for today, I was really caught by this phrase from St. Paul “for a helmet, the *hope* of salvation.” You may be familiar with this language about spiritual armor – we see in Ephesians chapter 6 a long list of “items” – the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, the helmet of salvation.

That last is particularly familiar to some clergy, as well, especially at a place like Grace Church, where on big feast days we wear a separate collar piece, often decorated with the color of the day, called an “amice”. When you put an amice on you actually start by draping it over your head (its initial purpose was to keep oils from less-frequently-washed hair from getting on the vestments). And while it’s on your head, there’s a prayer for you to say- “Lord, place upon me the helmet of salvation, to ward off the assaults of the Devil.” So I think about that helmet whenever I put an amice on.

But here in 1 Thessalonians, that’s not exactly the phrase Paul uses. He does not speak here about “the helmet of salvation”. He says that for a helmet, we have “the *hope* of salvation.” It’s *hope* that is the tool – that has the power to protect.

I like that. I like that better. Sometimes I think we think of hope as a sort of frail thing. I’ve heard myself say “Don’t get my hopes up!” when I don’t want my hope to be crushed. Sometimes we might think of hope as weak, or naïve, or even foolish. But hope is a lot stronger than we often give it credit for. In some of my darkest, most despairing times, when I felt like I could see no way how things could get better, when I felt like hope was gone – I look back on those moments now and I realize - that I kept going.

I kept getting up and going to school or work. I kept doing a lot of the things I usually did, as if I thought that something would change. I actually did have hope that things would improve, that something would happen, even when I didn’t acknowledge that hope. Hope is hard to beat all the way down. And it’s amazingly powerful for picking people back up.

Before I went to seminary, I had a job working at a place called St. Luke’s House in Silver Spring, Maryland. It is a community mental health program for people with severe and persistent mental illness. And I worked as what was called a “Supported Employment Specialist” – which means that I helped people find jobs in the competitive workforce and helped support people to keep those jobs once they had them.

I got this job right out of college and it was actually not my first choice for working with the St. Luke’s House program. I had been more interested in positions that were focused on getting people’s basic needs met – housing, counselling services, adequate food. I think I felt that employment was a little more abstract and less urgent and it didn’t have the same appeal to me.

But I discovered that this work was astonishingly powerful, and I’d like to give you the example of a client I worked with who I’ll call Gus. Gus had been with the St. Luke’s House program for a while, and he really struggled with depression. It was so profound that he would regularly miss meetings with us because he would go to bed and not get up for sometimes 5 days at a time, or more. His house was the dirtiest home I’ve ever seen, and so he usually appeared dishevelled and unclean when we met with him. He also struggled with drug abuse and was generally a deeply despairing man.

And so our employment team really didn’t know how we could help him find work. We were worried about how he might appear in an interview, but much more worried about him not being a reliable worker because it was so hard for him to get out of his house. But we found a job he was qualified for at as a driver for an auto parts company, and my supervisor was able to get him to an interview, and the company decided to give him a chance.

And I have never seen someone's life so transformed. From a man who did almost no activity other than lying in his bed, he became a reliable 5-day a week driver. He stopped sleeping for days at a time because he had somewhere he had to be and people were depending on him. He took up photography, a hobby he had formerly loved but had abandoned. And he began to get his drug problems under control, because he had to be sober to work.

It was like meeting a different person when we met with Gus after he got that job. He had been so buried under his despair that you couldn't really get to know him. But suddenly I met this lively, interesting, passionate man who was so startlingly full of life. Who had found a meaning and purpose to his days, and had rediscovered hope. I would never underestimate hope again. Hope is a powerful thing. And it can make a great defence – a great helmet.

But what about the particular hope that St. Paul speaks about – the hope of salvation? The hope of salvation is hope in the face of the darkest challenge in human life – the darkness of death.

We are blessed in this place and time to be able to avoid thinking about death a great deal. We do this as a society much more than previous generations, or people in many parts of the world today, are able to do. We have high quality medical care and relatively low incidence of violence, and so we have, in the last few generations in America, dramatically lowered the rates of especially young and untimely death from sickness and accidents. And so, we can avoid thinking about death a lot of the time, or even see it as a sort unusual tragedy.

But of course, we all, eventually, do come face-to-face with death. Our own or our loved ones'. And when we do, we may realize something about Jesus. For all the amazing things he did and said, for his example of life and his teachings, by far the most incredible thing he did was return from the dead.

The early Church was so blown away by this that the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed go straight from Jesus' birth to "he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again." The creeds jump straight over the rest of Jesus' life in their haste to get to the Resurrection, which is also our promise of Resurrection.

It's not that the other things Jesus did didn't matter. But they're not what changed the world. They're not what caused Christians to convert in the first place - even though in many places and times conversion to Christianity has been a death sentence – nor are they what has caused Christians to face down beasts, or enter worn torn lands where people were hostile to them, or walk right into cities ravaged by contagious illness and care for the sick when others had fled. Christians have been famous for doing this last since a major plague in Rome in the 3rd century, when many of them died, but many lives were saved because they stayed.

Christians continue to astound the world with this kind of behavior today, in war zones, in hot zones, and in places where becoming a Christian means at least suspicion and surveillance, if not imprisonment, torture, or death. These Christians are lights shining in the darkness. They are witnesses to a hope that is not cowed even by death.

Be we Christians here do not have to travel far to find darkness. It is here, too, in our communities, our schools and workplaces, hovering near our friends and families. And being beacons of hope in this place may not feel like it has the "superhero quality" of some of the Christians I've just mentioned – but it *does* have that quality.

We can change lives with our hope. We can offer the truth that the light of Christ is shining in every kind of darkness. As I saw with my own work at St. Luke's House, there is an incredible power in believing in and hoping for another person – and rekindling their hope.

We can do that for the people in our own lives who feel they are walking in darkness. For the people around the corner who walk in darkness. We can bring hope ourselves, or we can find other people who can help those in need of help and hope.

We can bring hope in the face of death and in the face of all kinds of despair. We can bring it here and we can bring it across the world. We can join with 2,000 years of crazy, hopeful Christians, and we can keep on shocking and changing the world with that hope. Amen.