

One New Book for the Preacher

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N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York, NY: HaperOne, 2008. 332 pages.

Titles are important, at least that is my opinion. I probably spend too much time trying to find the “right” title for a sermon. Often, as I work on a sermon, the title changes. I bring this up because what first attracted me to N.T. Wright’s book was the title: *Surprised by Hope*. The attraction of the title was accompanied by an appreciation of the work for the Bishop of Durham, England. Now, I am not a bishop, only a humble pastor who serves a congregation in another Durham in North Carolina. Durham, England is our sister city, and I have had the privilege of visiting that marvelous cathedral in Durham where the bishop sits. (No bishop envy here – we sent our bishop, Will Willimon, to Alabama.)

I like the title of the book, but I consider it an understatement. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is more than a surprise; it is a shock. It calls into question many of our carefully guarded assumptions about life, and it forces us to think outside the neatly arranged boxes in which we keep our perspective on life and life after death. I believe our vision of the afterlife is “muddled,” to borrow a word from the author, because the affirmation of our faith about hope in matters of life and death seems so strange and embarrassing. We need to listen as N.T. Wright offers a thoughtful consideration of what our faith traditions have to say about issues such as heaven and hell, afterlife and mission which are central to Christian theology.

My rabbi friend and colleague in Durham, North Carolina, often tells me how hard he works on his sermons for “Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” I tell him that it is the same with us Christian pastors for our “high holy days” as we prepare for Christmas and Easter. I find it particularly challenging and difficult to prepare a fresh, inspiring, and thought-provoking sermon for Easter. I remember the comment of the great Lutheran preacher – Edmond Steimle: “Don’t worry, let the music and the liturgy carry the day.” But we do worry, don’t we? There is pressure because we know the stakes are high as people hope we can address their hopes and fears. There is pressure because the pews will be full. Many of those in attendance on Easter are there because of the cultural expectation “to go to church on Easter.” Nevertheless, they are “listening in” to see if we have anything to say that makes sense.

For those of us who feel the pressure of the occasion to capture the meaning of the resurrection, *Surprised by Hope* is a courageous and valuable guide to a deeper understanding of Easter Hope. Wright brings the insights of a biblical scholar and theologian to bear on a subject central to our faith. He seeks to address two fundamental questions: 1) What do people believe in when they talk about life after death? 2) What difference does it make? The breadth of his knowledge and his insight into the biblical witness to the resurrection and the way the church has affirmed its belief in the resurrection of the dead provides help for the preacher. Wright seeks to address the confusion with which the Christian community understands and answers

these questions.

The author believes that we have lost a clear vision about what happens to us when we die. The belief in the immortality of the soul reflects a dualism which is not biblical and dilutes the authentic good news that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us to new life at the end of time.

He puts it this way: "It is simply assumed that the word *heaven* is the appropriate term for the ultimate destination, the final home, and that the language of resurrection and of the new earth as well as the new heavens must somehow be fitted into that" (p.19). I get uncomfortable at memorial services and funerals when pastors give vivid descriptions of where the deceased is. Wright reminds us that our faith does not offer us an admission ticket to a place "out of this world" called heaven. He and my rabbi friend are on the same page theologically because they begin with creation. Our destiny is determined by God the creator, and it is connected with God's work to restore heaven and earth. Wright emphasizes that it is not just about me and my soul. It is about a new creation.

Listen to a portion of how the author elaborates on the title: "Easter was when Hope in person surprised the whole world by coming forward from the future into the present. The ultimate future hope remains a surprise, partly because we don't know when it will arrive and partly because at present we have only images and metaphors for it, leaving us to guess that the reality will be far greater, and more surprising, still. And the intermediate hope—the things that happen in the present time to implement Easter and anticipate the final day—are always surprising" (p.29).

There are two reasons why I suggest this book. First, it encourages us to go back to the basic teachings of the church on issues of life after death and the resurrection. We should wrestle with the biblical texts and then listen to our mothers and fathers in the faith as they bear witness to what they have seen and heard.

This strength in the book leads to a weakness. N.T. Wright believes there is only one way to understand our destiny after death. The dead are not in a place called heaven, but they are waiting for the second coming which will bring the general bodily resurrection. Clearly, this is central to our faith. There are, however, other perspectives in Scripture and our tradition. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that we are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" who died in faith. One of my favorite times of the church year is All Saints, when we remember all the saints who from their labors rest and who make up the communion of the saints. I delight in the portion of the Great Thanksgiving prayer when we acknowledge that we are joined at the Lord's table "with all the faithful of every time and place."

There is a great mystery about the whereabouts of all those who rest from their earthly labors. Wright's certainty on these matters and his criticism of the hymns and sermons that diverge from the "correct" understandably left me uncomfortable. I stand with the Apostle Paul on these matters when he says that we see things dimly, but we shall see face to face one day (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The second great strength of this book is the way Wright brings the resurrection down to earth. God's raising Jesus from the dead is the beginning of God's reconstruction of the new creation. This insight has important implications for the mission of the church. The last two chapters of the book flesh out the work of the church as a demonstration of what God intends for the whole creation. We have a vision in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ of what will come to pass in God's own good

time. Wright puts the challenge before us this way: “Our task in the present—of which this book, God willing, may form a part—is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and foretaste of the second” (p.30).

It is my hope that you find this book an aid in getting ready for Easter and in living as resurrection people.