

Sermon “Rooted Hope”
Kirk of St James
Sunday July 19, 2026
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Paul was never known for doing things in half measures. I suspect he would have been an overwhelming person to be around, as he jumped fully into things and never minced words. The book of Romans is the largest of the books that Paul wrote, and it is difficult to categorize. N.T. Wright describes it as follows:

“... Romans is neither a systematic theology nor a summary of Paul's lifework, but it is by common consent his masterpiece. It dwarfs most of his other writings, an Alpine peak towering over hills and villages. Not all onlookers have viewed it in the same light or from the same angle, and their snapshots and paintings of it are sometimes remarkably unlike. Not all climbers have taken the same route up its sheer sides, and there is frequent disagreement on the best approach. What nobody doubts is that we are here dealing with a work of massive substance, presenting a formidable intellectual challenge while offering a breathtaking theological and spiritual vision.”

Our reading this morning is no exception. Paul speaks honestly, but he also speaks with hope. He is talking to people who know the joy of faith, but also the ache of living in a world that is not yet whole. He names life and death, slavery and adoption, suffering and glory, groaning and hope. And right in the middle of all of that, he reminds us that we are living between what God has already done for us in Christ and what God will one day bring fully into view.

While Paul was writing for an ancient audience who in many ways were not unlike us. People who know what it is to struggle. People who have felt afraid. People who have carried grief. People who look at the world and think, “This is not the way it is supposed to be.” And Paul does not say, “Just ignore that.” He does not say, “Pretend everything is fine.” Instead, he

gives us hope. Not a thin, cheerful kind of hope, but a deep hope—hope that comes from the Spirit of God.

One of the major themes in this passage is identity. “Who are we, now that we have accepted God’s gracious gift of Jesus the Messiah, and what will our current life look like? Further, what are the tensions inherent in living in a period between the already of his death and resurrection and the not-yet of his coming in glory to complete God’s redemption of the creation?” Living in this tension, working to understand what our faith looks like in light of this, is one of the greater challenges of the Christian life.

Paul begins by saying, “So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” Now that word “debtors” is important. Paul is saying, “You do not owe the old life anything.” Fear does not own us. Sin does not own us. Shame does not own us. The patterns that pull us away from God and neighbour do not get the final claim on our lives. Paul makes a distinction between the kinds of debtors. He also makes a distinction about to whom the debt is owed. It was interesting because one commentary writer spoke about debt not being the basic problem but rather to whom you owe the debt. I had never thought about that before. They compared it to a parent, deciding to help their child pay for their schooling—a choice made out of love, in order to help their child. Debt held in the hands of a creator who loves us is very different from debt owed to the world and its institutions and sometimes predatory practices.

By the Spirit. That is the key. The Spirit is not an optional extra in the Christian life. The Spirit is God’s own life at work in us—the quiet, steady power of resurrection, leading us away from what diminishes life and toward the life of God.

Then Paul shifts from obligation to identity. He says, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” The deepest truth about us is not our failure. It is not our shame. It is

not our fear. It is not even our striving to get everything right. The deepest truth is this: in Christ, you are a beloved child of God—that is our identity.

After talking about death Paul moves on to the language of slavery and adoption. “Both the analogy of freedom from slavery and the metaphor of adoption spoke vividly to the church in Rome. Made up of Jews, proselytes, and other non-Jews, many of whom were not native to Rome, the church was mixed across social strata, drawing largely from lower classes, including slaves and freed persons...Not only are Christians to understand themselves as “free” from their former slavery; they are made part of a new family by adoption, so much so that they may call God “abba! Father!” in the words of Christs’ own prayer.” Again, there is an interesting distinction here, not only are we adopted but we are to call God Father just as God’s own son does. Paul describes being fully welcomed into God’s family with no caveats. For people who had been displaced, who were refugees, who had been torn from their homelands that feeling of belonging would have struck a deep chord. You are known, you are loved, and you belong.

Now, that does not mean life suddenly becomes easy. Paul is honest about that. Adoption does not lift us out of all suffering. Instead, it gathers our suffering into the life of Christ. Paul says that if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—“if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” To belong to Christ is not to be spared every sorrow. It is to know that sorrow is not the final authority over us.

That matters, because some of us have wondered—maybe quietly, maybe more than once—whether suffering means God has stepped away. Paul says no. The children of God may suffer, but they do not suffer as orphans. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are God’s children. Even when words fail, even when faith feels small, even when all we can do is whisper, “Abba,” the Spirit testifies that we belong to God.

Then Paul widens the lens. This is not only about individual believers. It is bigger than that. It is as wide as creation itself. He says, “The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.”

And we know something about that groaning, do we not? We hear it in the earth strained by greed and neglect. We hear it in hospital rooms and funeral homes. We hear it in families carrying conflict, communities longing for justice, and hearts worn thin by anxiety. Paul does not pretend the world is quietly fine while people suffer. He tells the truth: the whole creation groans as in labour pains.

Now, labour pains are real pain but, they are not meaningless pain. They are pain moving toward birth. That does not make the pain easy, and it does not make it small. But it does mean the pain is not empty. Paul dares to tell us that creation’s groaning is not the sound of death having the last word. It is the sound of a world waiting for redemption. Having the Spirit does not mean we never ache. Faith does not mean pretending everything is fine. That is partially at least, what it means to live in a world of almost but not yet, the tension between the holy and the human—that is where hope lives.

Hope encourages us to see what is possible and empowers us to confront the evils of this world like injustice, inequality, racism, and the list continues—knowing that these things are never the last word in God’s kingdom. As one person said, “We hunger for more, and we cry out wherever love is absent, life is shortened, and freedom is taken away.” Paul assures us that we are known, we are loved, and God’s word is the final word. Hope that is promised in the love of God is not insubstantial, it will not be blown away on a breeze, rather it is deeply rooted and will always hold us.