

“Sources of Hope”
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“Sources of hope”—this is a phrase that has stood out in my mind ever since I heard it. Sitting in an uncomfortable classroom at the University of Central America in San Salvador, our group of students silently listened as a student of the UCA shared the story of November 16, 1989, the day when six Jesuit priests were killed by the Salvadoran military. The motivation behind their assassinations was that the priests had spoken out against the war happening in their country. The student told us about how the stories and memories of these men’s deaths were not stories of deep sorrow, nor anger, rather served as sources of hope for a new El Salvador, free of oppression and such horrific violence. He shared with us how if someone was killed during this time, their death gave inspiration—inspiration for change and for a more just and less violent future.

This visit was part of my study abroad experience in Central America last semester. I was able to live and study in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. These were the best four months of my life. And I don’t say that because they were the most fun I had ever had (even if that is true), but because it was in Central America when I came to view the gospel in a different way.

When I’m asked which country was the best, I usually respond with El Salvador, even though it was in El Salvador where I laughed the least, danced the least, and had very little time to take many fun excursions.

I knew that when I was in El Salvador, I was walking on holy ground. We were surrounded with the remnants and memories of death. Death was present in the testimony of a sole survivor of a massacre that wiped out his whole community. It was present in the stories of gang violence and the inability to escape it. It was present in the churches where people had taken refuge from killers who were massacring entire groups of people. And the Salvadoran people made no attempts to forget these painful memories, rather wanted to share them with all who would listen.

In El Salvador I discovered the importance of historical memory. We visited many sites, museums, and centers where the goal is to remember and honor those who have been killed. The people of El Salvador feel the need to remember the death of their people. The most recognizable face that can be seen on buildings, posters, and t-shirts everywhere you go is that of the most well-known martyr of El Salvador, Oscar Romero. Romero was archbishop during times of high violence, and he used his sermons and his position to speak out against the oppression. His call for peace eventually led to his assassination. During one of his last homilies, Romero faced his inevitable soon-to-be assassination, and said, “I don’t believe in death without resurrection: if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people.” The life, death, and resurrection of Romero are very much present in the people of El Salvador.

Romero knew that his death was coming, and he faced it. He didn’t allow death threats to stop from speaking out against the oppression of his people. He embraced the

resurrection promise while staring into the eyes of his death. I was so astounded at how the Salvadoran people are not afraid to confront what has happened in their country, and are allowing the dark memories to give them life...to give them a resurrected life anew. It's as though they recognize the importance of Good Friday while rejoicing in the good news of Easter Sunday. Pain and death are not to be ignored—but they are not the final word. And the people of El Salvador have not let the pain be the final word. They have used the stories of oppression and the loss of loved ones to motivate and inspire change. They have fully embraced the phrase, “Basta ya!” which means Enough already! They have become determined to make sure that life is preserved, rather than taken. But if they had not recognized the pain and injustice happening in their country, would they have known that it was time to change? Obviously, the violence was everywhere, and it was impossible to be in the country and turn a blind eye to it. But why does it have to take such an extent of suffering and massacre before we realize that we need to do something?

My biggest fear about returning to the states after my semester in Central America is that I wouldn't feel as much—and that people wouldn't care as much, nor want to care. To be honest, this has happened, and I'm still struggling to find people who want to hear about the people of El Salvador, who want to no longer be ignorant, who have the courage to face the difficult stories...and I've struggled to make myself remember them as well.

The people of El Salvador embody the words of Paul, who says that we are hard pressed, but we are not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. Suffering is real and pain hurts. But how often do we turn ourselves away from suffering of others and ourselves, because we do not have the courage to face it? The Salvadoran people face death with open eyes, and find hope and life in it. They truly embrace the hope of the resurrection and it is made known within them. Central America is filled with such joyful people, and it is hard to imagine that hundreds of thousands of loved ones have been killed in the past few decades. It is because of their embrace of death *and* the resurrected life that they can find joy. I have never seen the message of Christ—of his life, death, and resurrection as embodied as I have in the people of Central America.

As Americans and as humans, we often get caught up in the first part of the words of Paul: we hear that we are hard pressed, crushed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, but we fail to remember the cross that comes with it. We get so caught up in the difficulties that we almost forget the verse that comes before which tells us that all-surpassing power is from God. God can make all things new—even bring the dead to life. We must carry around these painful things to remember our own pain and the death of Christ, but may we not forget that although we are suffering, we are not left to despair; we are not abandoned nor crushed. We must remember the last part of Paul's phrases. We are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, but his life is also revealed. Death does not have the final word.

I believe that *our* greatest oppression is that we are afraid to face death, to face our Christ crucified. We want to remain in the darkness of ignorance, where it is easy and where we don't have to respond. But this darkness in us is just as dark as the darkness in the world around us. It is easy to remain complacent, to turn a shoulder, to forget about the poor...but we have been called by Jesus to shine his light in the darkness.

We are called to do justice, not because people are suffering, not just because people are hungry, but because people are dying...both physically and emotionally. We are called to be justice by seeing the reality of pain. But through this, we are always called to give life. We are called to liberate, to make known that although pain is real, it does not have the last word. We are called to give food to the starving. We are called to provide care for the sick. Through these things, we deliver the gospel promise. For those of us who are Christian, doing justice should never be far from the gospel message. How better to proclaim the resurrection news than to shine light into places of darkness—by giving life, in form of food, compassion, money, healing, friendship, or understanding. When we truly live in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the forgotten, we are not just doing justice; we are giving life itself. These are all ways that we shine the resurrected life in situations of death. I hope that we serve and do justice not because it is the right thing to do, or to feel good about ourselves, but because people are dying and we have heard the promise that resurrection is possible and that life can be given anew. Let us give life because Christ lives within us...just as Romero continues to live in the people of El Salvador.

One thing I used to be skeptical of was so-called service events that just increased awareness for something. Let's not wear shoes for a day to raise awareness about all those who don't have shoes. Let's wear a bracelet to make people aware of all the people without clean water. Let's invite a speaker to talk to our campus so we can become aware of human trafficking. But now I realize that these attempts to raise awareness have SO much necessity. Because we often blind ourselves from the reality of suffering, we must first open our eyes and force ourselves to confront it.

When we become aware of suffering, pain, and death—around the world and in our own lives—may we remember what Easter is all about. It is about a Savior who has told us and shown us that death does not have the last word...that resurrection comes. We cannot forget that we are an afflicted, perplexed, struck down people...and we cannot forget the reality of the cross before we rejoice in the resurrection. But may we be more like the people of El Salvador, who live in a culture where pain is so real, yet have the courage to face it and find joy within and beyond it. The people of El Salvador showed me how to find life that shines through death, but they also showed me that it takes action on our part to make the resurrected Christ known. The Salvadoran people are a people united and determined to continue living. We are not just called to do justice—to remember the poor, to assist the afflicted—but when we do these things we do what we are truly called to do, and that is to give and restore life. We cannot see the light until our eyes are opened to the darkness. My prayer is that we can find hope in the new life in Christ, who has overcome it all; and that we have the courage to face the darkness, and the strength to be the light that breaks it.

Prelude
Welcome/Announcements
Invocation

Lenten Litany for Justice

One: God of justice, you call us in this time to see the world as it is:
broken, alone, embattled.

Many: Grant us new ways to see justice, new ways to be justice to the wanderer and the hungry of this world.

One: God of mercy, work through our hands to free the oppressed and break every yoke.

Many: We are challenged by a world that tells us to bury our heads and be satisfied with our individual comfort.

One: Embolden us Lord with strength that helps us to speak out against injustice.

Many: We seek to shake off our own yokes of complacency. We seek a holy fast from that in our world that causes silence when shouting is needed.

One: Help us O God, to be prophets in our time.

All: Remembering that we are empowered by the grace of Christ, and that with you all things are possible.

Opening Song – *Marvelous Light*

Scripture – 2 Corinthians 4: 1-12

Message

Song – *Christ Be Our Light* 715

Prayer:

God of resurrection and new life, restore our world. Where there is pain, let there be grace. Where there is suffering, bring serenity. For those afraid, help them be brave. Where there is misery, bring expectancy. Give us the courage to see, to act, and to give life. Because surely we can change. Surely we can change something. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Benediction – to the tune of *Edelweiss*

Dismissal

Postlude