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## Signs of Hope

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***1 Peter 1:3-12** “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look!”*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

New birth, resurrection, inheritance, protection, salvation, rejoicing, love, joy, grace, glory, good news – this text from 1 Peter is full of hopeful words. It is appropriate that in this time of political turbulence, economic uncertainty, global warming, contagious diseases, pandemics, epidemics, extremism and other challenges, we turn our focus to signs of hope.

It is appropriate, too, that you have asked someone from what is often viewed as a hopeless situation to bring you words of hope. As a member of a minority church from a part of the world that has yet to have its hopes for peace based on justice be realized, I know a thing or two about seeing signs of hope amid innumerable challenges. This is why I have chosen the beautiful hymn of the resurrection – the ultimate sign of hope – as the text for today.

Jesus Christ’s resurrection is the center of our hope and the center of this life. It is central to the Gospels, which were written from the point of view of resurrection. It was in the resurrection that Jesus was revealed as Lord and Savior. It was because of the resurrection that the early church was given the power of the Spirit. It was because of the resurrection



that those first Christians could look to the future and have a living hope in everlasting life. Likewise today, we cannot see the future, but because of the resurrection, we can have hope in the present and hope for the future. This is why Paul writes, “If Christ is not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). So resurrection is the source of hope.

A theologian once said, “Hope is the inseparable companion of faith.” Faith believes in God, and hope awaits the moment when this truth is confirmed. Faith is the basis for hope, and hope perseveres to feed and affirm and renew faith’s vitality. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann says, “In the Christian life faith has the priority, but hope the primacy” (*Theology of Hope*, 2002). Without hope, faith weakens and dies. Martin Luther says, “Therefore faith is like dialectic, which conceives the idea of all the things that are to be believed, and hope is like rhetoric, which develops, urges, persuades and exhorts to steadiness, so that faith does not collapse in temptation but keeps the word and holds firmly to it” (Luther’s Works, 23-24).

What is the nature of this hope born of the resurrection of Jesus Christ? It is not a hope that aspires to life after death as if life on earth has no value or meaning. Rather, it is a hope that leads us to look at life here on earth from the perspective of eternal values: love, holiness and communion with God and the saints.

In the place where heaven met earth in the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, there are many churches. Even though the ELCJHL is young compared to many of them, we are an integral part of the 2000 year history of Christianity, which began when the first witnesses to the resurrection went out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Centuries later, Protestant missionaries came here and revived the Gospel among us through diaconal and mission work. As a result, my church celebrates this year 170 years of evangelical mission, 50 years of the royal recognition of the establishment of the synod and 30 years of the establishment of the Arab bishopric. Each day we live out this heritage as an expression of our experience of the resurrection.

Martin Luther once said, “If I knew that Christ would come tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today.” We Palestinian Christians, living as we do in a hopeless situation, nevertheless plant figurative and real olive trees every day by giving our people signs of hope and reminding them that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Now, allow me to plant olive trees here in Lyon by sharing with you signs of hope from my church, signs that exist because of our strong faith in the Risen Lord.

### **Sign of hope: our ecclesiastical work**

God calls the ELCJHL to proclaim the Gospel within an Arab context in the Holy Lands. To preach the gospel and administer the sacraments is always a vivid sign of hope. Along with preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments in our congregations, we serve our communities, educate our children, uplift our women and train future church leaders.



## Sign of hope: our ecumenical ministry

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land works closely with the other Christian churches in the Holy Land and the Middle East to interpret the difficult and often tense circumstances of daily life in Israel and Palestine. Given the choice to live and witness together or to die alone, we choose to witness together. Allow me to discuss some of the shared concerns and efforts of Jerusalem churches.

1. Emigration of Christians: In 1948, Christians made up 26 percent of the population of Israel-Palestine. Due largely to emigration, that number has fallen to less 2 percent today. To stem the tide of emigration, Christian churches work together to encourage people to stay through education, job creation, housing development and strengthening church institutions.

2. Shared Jerusalem: Jerusalem is the spiritual home for the three Abrahamic faiths. Our vision is one of a shared future in a shared city. We reject any claims of exclusive access to Jerusalem by any religion. Each must have its own identity and free access to its holy places. This is only possible if it is truly shared the way God intended.

The Patriarchs and Heads of Local Christian Churches in Jerusalem jointly call for a Jerusalem that is open to all residents and pilgrims, where property rights are observed and whose holy places are accessible to worshippers.

3. The Lutheran-Reformed Mutual Recognition Agreement, signed by seven churches in the region in 2006, was an important step for evangelical churches in the Middle East. Foreign missions planted churches here over the years, reviving the Gospel among us; now it is our responsibility to preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and continue to revive the evangelical witness. This is why my church, through the Fellowship of the Middle East Evangelical Churches, initiated this effort for mutual recognition.

4. Accompaniment – Our accompaniment relationship with our partners is a great source of hope. In accompaniment, partners walk together as Christ walked with the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In accompaniment, we are refreshed as we break bread together and go to the world to teach, preach, baptize and make ourselves and others his disciples. As we accompany one another, we are reminded that we are interdependent, not independent.

## Sign of hope: our interfaith ministry

Despite tense political circumstances, the ELCJHL continues to engage in interfaith dialogue, seeking to contribute to a just peace throughout the Middle East. Through interfaith dialogue, we affirm the contributions of each religion toward the values of justice, peace, reconciliation, coexistence, forgiveness and toleration.



Our interfaith efforts include Jewish-Christian dialogue in the Jonah Dialogue Group and Muslim-Christian dialogue that includes statements of mutual respect such as the 2008 Amman Declaration. Dialogue and cooperation among the three faiths is facilitated by the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land, formed in 2005 to promote interreligious understanding and cooperation.

### **Sign of hope: our ministry of reconciliation**

Some say pursuing peace is too political. But for me, peacemaking is not simply political, it is biblical. When political realities cause my people to lose faith, it is no longer a political but a spiritual issue. That is why the ELCJHL is deeply invested in seeking reconciliation in this land. I believe true reconciliation has the following marks:

1. Genuine reconciliation can grow only in a culture of truthfulness.
2. Reconciliation is built on justice, and the fruit of justice is peace.
3. For true reconciliation to occur, we must be willing to forgive.

### **Sign of hope: a new day has dawned**

St. Peter, in his hymn of resurrection, encourages us when he says, “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials.” The ELCJHL is a suffering church. But this church says that as long as there is a living Lord, there is hope for the Middle East. Empowered by the resurrection, our church has become an instrument of peace, a broker for justice, a beacon of hope, a defender of human rights including women’s rights, an initiator of interfaith dialogue and a minister of reconciliation.

My sisters and brothers, we stand as a living church, full of hope, in the light of a new dawn. Do not forget us. Do not leave us alone. Pray for us, for our mission is yours and yours is ours. May God bless you.