About a decade or so ago, an author named Barbara Ehrenreich wrote about her struggle with breast cancer. The title of the book is, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. Did she actually write “undermined?” What a downer!

What Ehrenreich most detested about her experience with her illness was the relentless forced doses of saccharine optimism that she endured throughout the ordeal.

She writes dismissively of the breast cancer teddy bears sold in hospital gift shops. She insists that all this mandatory cheeriness is unhealthy and undesirable. She maintains that cancer patients actually reinforce this reality - heaping optimism on each other.

When she complained on an internet blog about “the debilitating effects of chemotherapy, recalcitrant insurance companies, and ‘sappy pink ribbons,’” her post was answered with a flood of angry rebukes from other breast cancer patients accusing her of being negative.

The book is no less than a double-barreled broadside blast aimed directly at optimism. Norman Vincent Peale, early 20th Century preacher and author of the classic, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, would not be pleased.

So here it is Easter morning. Why in the world would a minister want to talk about a completely “un-Easter” book like this? For one simple reason –this odd book unknowingly invites a very important distinction –the distinction between optimism and hope.

In my opinion, the optimism the author is critiquing, and the hope I believe in, are not the same thing. Oh, we often use the two words interchangeably as if they were, but for a people of faith, optimism and hope are not the same thing.

- Optimism comes from within us.
- Optimism is an adopted attitude.
- Optimism is a chosen outlook.
- Optimism is human, which is both optimism’s strength and its weakness.
Don’t get me wrong. Optimism – well-placed, realistic, circumspect optimism – is an appealing mortal virtue. I love chipper people. I do believe that attitude determines experience. Optimism, however, is not hope. The two are not at all the same thing, not for people of the Christian faith anyway.

Optimism is grounded in us, in the human. Hope, on the other hand, is not grounded in us. Hope is grounded in our trust in God and what God has done.

Most specifically, Christian hope is grounded in the paired realisms of Good Friday and Easter, and what we believe God has done in each.

• Good Friday unblinkingly faces the most tragic realities of the human condition.
• Good Friday recognizes the reality of evil.
• Good Friday is betrayal, suffering, injustice, and death.

It’s all there, summed up and held before our eyes in the cross. Christian hope never trivializes the hard realities of the human condition. There is none of the denial and illusion that Barbara Ehrenreich so harshly critiques in her book.

But Good Friday is only the preamble to Christian hope. Christian hope is finally and firmly grounded in the mystery and reality of Easter.

Easter is nothing less than the definitive declaration that the eternal final words are not the evil, injustice, sin and death of Good Friday.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ insists that the final words, the truest truths, are goodness and justice and love and life. These things, resurrection declares, these things are the ultimate realities of the universe and the governing truths of your life and mine.

So it is, that at the moment when churches around the world – Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox – gather for worship on Easter Sunday, the priest or minister has forever called the congregation to worship with the same ancient words.

He does not say, “Attitude determines experience.” She doesn’t say, “Cheer up, look on the bright side.” Not bad counsel, but such phrases represent a sentiment too light for the realities for life as it is.

Around the globe, down through time, in a thousand languages, the Easter Call to Worship has been the same: “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed.” Therein is our hope.
This hope is grounded not in us. It is no mere human optimism, pleasant as such a disposition may be. Rather this great hope is grounded in our trust in the power and goodness of God.

Down through the years as I approach Good Friday and Easter, my thoughts, my memories relive many of the tragic stories I have encountered.
- I relive funerals I have officiated at for those too young or too vibrant to be dead.
- I remember the hospital beds I’ve sat by.
- I visualize the tears shed in my study.

All of these memories vividly restore many of the Good Friday realities I have encountered.

I think of the things that I said, and of the things I did not say. These memories create a resolve in my present pastoral ministry. I no longer say, “Try to cheer up. Try to be more optimistic.” All such cheeriness would be thin optimism soup that provides no healthy nourishment for the soul.

The words that now lie within my heart are these: “Hope. Hope because our Good Fridays, our moments when life feels so awful, do not have the last word. Hope, because, in the end, Easter Sunday is truer than Good Friday.”

This one great fact changes everything. Indeed, it translates mere optimism into death-defying hope. We then can look at our lives, even in the struggle and pain of life, and we can grab on to the hope of Easter. We can seize the day, “\textit{carpe diem}.”

Living as people of the empty tomb, we throw away the fears that hold us back, that block our way, and that keep us from being the agents of Jesus’ life and love in the world. We can seize the day, “\textit{carpe diem}.”

- Filled with hope we follow a risen Christ, knowing that the events of today are not the end of our story. Our lives are stories being written.
- Filled with hope we follow a risen Christ, knowing that we can live as Christ lived, serving others.
- Filled with hope we follow a risen Christ, knowing that we do not have to let a broken world define us. We are citizens of God’s realm, helping to define a new world.
- Filled with hope we follow a risen Christ, knowing that in following Jesus our lives become 500% better.

The resurrection, as rock group U2’s Bono puts it, was when "the universe exploded in
Easter is miraculous. When we try to cram Jesus back into the tomb so that he will comfortably fit into our lives, we find ourselves distorting everything that made up Jesus' life and ministry on earth. It is time to let go and to let God. We seize the day, “carpe diem.”

We seize this day and become the people of Easter. We walk with bold faithfulness through the tomb's opened doorway, look at its empty, uninhabited space and shout the miracle: "He is Risen!"

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!