

The Hope of Easter

John 20-21

April 20, 2014

Introduction:

Hope is a commodity great in demand but short in supply. Everyone is looking for hope. They want to find hope that their marriage will get better, hope their kids will learn the lessons they taught them and not make wrecks of their lives, hope that the hurts of life will heal over time, hope that all their labor will count for something that matters, hope the future won't be as bad as they fear. People want hope not in the way we sometimes use the word as a term of wishful thinking, such as, "I hope the Cubs pitching roster is stronger than it was last season because I'd really like to see them win the pennant this year." No, we're looking for a hope that has a real weight to it, a hope we can cling to, that we can grab hold of, that we can rest our discouraged and hurting hearts upon and find some sense of security and certainty in the midst of the ever-swirling cyclone of our broken and chaotic lives. We're looking for a hope that is grounded in reality and truth and not in just our subjective wish-fulfillment.

And yet so often such hope is difficult to find, isn't it? People look everywhere for it: in drugs and alcohol, in relationships, in success at their jobs, in the approval of others, in the accumulation of money and possessions, in their accomplishments, in anything and everything that might provide for them hope that tomorrow will be better than today. Yet none of these things ever deliver on the hope they promise. The new fling eventually turns out to be just as annoying or boring as the last person you were with. The high that granted you escape at first only returns you to a place lower than where you first began. No matter how far up you climb the corporate ladder, there's always another rung higher to go. Your accomplishments only give you joy and recognition for a fleeting moment, until you realize someone has done more and received more recognition than you. The new gadget only staves off the emptiness of your heart for a little while until it becomes another rummage sale item. So when one source of hope fails us, we go looking again somewhere else – a new purchase, a new relationship, a new drug, a new goal – as we desperately try to find the certainty of hope that seems to be ever-elusive.

But the good news of Easter morning is that the hope we're all desperately searching for has been found, and it is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Christ from the dead provides the hope we're looking for: not wish-fulfillment, not lucky guesses, not one-in-a-million chances, but real, rock solid, bet-your-life-on-it, true hope for everyone who seeks to find it in him. This morning as we consider the resurrection account from the gospel of John, I want to show how the resurrected Lord provides hope to four different types of people, people who are very much like us, wrestling with the same issues you and I do. So if you would, please open your Bibles with me to John 20 which can be found in the hardcover pew Bibles on pg. 906. The passage takes place the Sunday morning following Good Friday when Jesus was crucified by the Romans. As we read it, it'll lead us to our first point of the message this morning which addresses how Jesus provides...

1. Hope for those who mourn

Please follow along as I read v. 1-18 in John 20. **“Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’ - and that he had said these things to her.”**

Mary Magdalene is one of the women who followed Jesus and had come to Jesus’ tomb that morning to anoint the body. Needless to say, she was surprised to find upon reaching the tomb that the massive stone had been rolled away and his body was not there. She calls Peter and John, two of Jesus’ closest disciples, to come and see the empty tomb, assuming that sometime in the night the Romans had decided to move the body to an undisclosed location. After examining the tomb for themselves, the two men head off leaving Mary there **“weeping outside the tomb.”**

Imagine how hopeless Mary must have felt in that moment. Within the past three days she had witnessed her Lord be betrayed, arrested, tried, beaten, and then publicly executed by crucifixion. And now, when she at least had an opportunity to honor him in death by anointing his body with spices, even this is taken from her. In this darkest of moments Mary’s loss is total. So she weeps, a word used to describe her four times in this passage. She is a woman who has suffered a terrible loss and like all those who have suffered the loss of a loved one in death, Mary grieves over her loss by weeping.

Many of you here have personally known the taste of bitter tears that flow when a loved one dies. Death steals from us those we love, snatches from us the people we cherish the most, leaving us with sorrow and weeping and grieving. Those of us who have lost someone close know precisely what Mary was experiencing in this moment. You know the loss of hope that accompanies death, the emptiness of realizing you will never hear their voice again, never laugh or talk or enjoy their company like you once did. So like us, Mary mourns her loss.

So then, what is the promise of Easter to those who mourn? It is this: death does not get the final word. Jesus, who once was dead, who Mary wept over, is now alive! He appeared to Mary as she wept at the entrance to the tomb and transformed her tears of sorrow to tears of joy. Jesus had been resurrected in accordance with his promise. The cords of death had been broken and now Jesus was alive, his resurrected body physically standing before Mary, speaking to her, embracing her, giving her back the hope that had been shattered only hours before when she watched his bloodied and beaten body breathe its last on the cross.

My friends, Easter gives hope to us who mourn. It says to us: Death is not the end. The promise of Easter is those who have died in Christ will also be raised in Christ, in bodies imperishable, glorified, and perfected. Some of you have lost loved ones over whom you have rightfully shed many tears, but Easter is God's promise to you that he will not abandon your loved ones to the grave, for those in Christ will rise and be with him forever. Because of Jesus, death does not get the final word. There is the hope of eternal life, when we will no longer say our final goodbyes at a graveside but will instead be forever with those fellow believers who have passed before us.

So rejoice in this first hope given to us on Easter morning: that death is defeated and those who died in Christ will one day most certainly live again, in glorified resurrected bodies for all eternity, where weeping and mourning over death will be no more. The resurrection gives us the certainty of hope that though we may mourn for a time, our tears are only temporary, for eternal life awaits all those in Christ Jesus. But moving on now, Easter not only gives hope to those who mourn, it also gives...

2. Hope for those who fear

Look back at your Bible at just v. 19-20. **“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”** We'll stop right there.

After all that had transpired over the past few days, the disciples were afraid. The Jewish leaders had carried out a successful plot on Jesus' life and there was good reason to fear they could be next on the Pharisees' hit list. As followers of Jesus, they had preached the same message that got Jesus into hot water and so for all they knew, the Jewish religious leaders would turn their murderous eye upon them

next. So they were afraid, huddling behind locked doors, fearful of what dangers tomorrow would hold.

Some of us are like these disciples: we live in fear. For some, it is a fear concerning our lives. We worry about tomorrow, about whether we'll be laid off from our jobs, anxious over concerns for those in our family, over health issues that loom on the horizon, or our finances, just to name a few. For others, there's fear over the many societal changes that have rapidly changed the landscape of our country. We fear of what our country will be like for our children and grandchildren. We fear the loss of religious liberties, fear growing persecution for living out our convictions at work and at school, or fear the increasing godlessness that seems to grow by leaps and bounds in all aspects of life.

But the resurrection gives us hope because it demonstrates that what may seem like a victory for the powers of darkness can be used by God to accomplish his purposes. To the disciples, the world seemed to be gripped in the victorious power of darkness. All had been lost: Jesus was dead, executed by crucifixion, and their little band of followers might at any moment hear the knock of the Roman soldiers at their door, ready to escort them to prison and possibly death. But then Jesus shows up in their midst, alive and well, and dispels the clouds of fear with the words, **"Peace be with you."** Peace: the very opposite of fear and worry and gnawing anxiety. Jesus was saying to them by his presence: the darkness has not overcome the Light. God has triumphed over the grave, over death, hell and Satan's power. God is still God and Christ will now begin to redeem the world. You don't need to fear any longer: find peace in the certainty that God has raised Christ from the dead and is now setting in motion his plan to save his people and crush Satan under his feet once and for all.

So I say to you here this morning: do not fear the future, whether be it for this country or in the concerns of your personal life. The resurrection proves that God is in charge and Satan doesn't have the upper hand. God will provide for his own. He did not abandon Jesus to the grave and he will not abandon those of us who are in Christ by faith. As he was for the disciples, so also is he present with you in the midst of your fear and says to you, "Peace be with you." It's because of this the apostle Paul can write these glorious words in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Yes! Things may look bad and things might look grim, but Easter reminds us God stands sovereign over all things and is in complete control. We need not fear that the world and our lives are spinning out of control: God is with us and he is in charge of every trial, every person, and every situation we face.

So Easter gives hope to those in fear and also hope to those who mourn. Now I want us to consider the third aspect of hope found in the Easter story and that it provides...

3. Hope for those who doubt

Jump ahead a few verses and follow along as I read v. 24-29. **"Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the**

other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.’ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

Of all the disciples, Thomas is the one who perhaps we modern people can relate to the most. He’s the empiricist; he demands clear, physical, undeniable evidence if he’s going to believe. Thomas knows people don’t come back to life after they die and they certainly don’t do so if their death came by Roman crucifixion. And as much as he’d like to believe what his fellow disciples are telling him, mere testimony wasn’t going to cut it for Thomas. He needed real proof, as in Jesus standing before him with nail-pierced hands and a wounded side he could touch if he was to believe. Until he had concrete and undeniable proof, Thomas wasn’t going to get his hopes up.

As 21st century Americans, we can be a lot like Thomas: quick to doubt and slow to believe, at least until we have some solid evidence to go on. It’s easy to doubt, to be skeptical, to nurse our questions and question the answers given to us. Perhaps some of you here have approached Christianity that way: you’re skeptical about it. You think maybe it is true, but then again, maybe not. You need proof. You want evidence. You’re not interested in hearsay; you want something solid, concrete, certain, undeniable.

The hope of Easter here in these verses is that Jesus is willing to provide proof to the doubter. I love the fact that Jesus doesn’t rebuke Thomas for his doubt. He doesn’t say, “Look Thomas, you were with me for three years and heard me talk about what I came to do. Wasn’t that enough? Can’t you just take the word of our fellow disciples at face value? What’s the matter with you?” He doesn’t do that; instead Jesus meets Thomas in his doubt and offers him just what he needs in order to believe. Thomas has real doubts about Jesus and Jesus shows real grace and love to Thomas by giving him the proof he is looking for.

So let me say there is hope to be found here for all who struggle with doubt, who want to believe but are wrestling with questions and uncertainties. Know that Jesus will not cast you out for your honest struggle with doubt. He didn’t rebuke Thomas for his doubt; he graciously supplied Thomas with exactly what he needed to turn his doubt into faith. Jesus said elsewhere, “Seek and you will find... ask and you will receive.” So if you are seeking right now, if you’re asking the questions, if you’re wondering and doubting, Jesus isn’t angry with you; he’s available to help you. Jesus will supply what you need, grant what you lack, lead you to the answers to the questions you have. Do not allow your doubt to lead you away from God; instead,

expect it to lead him to you. There is hope for all those who wrestling with doubt because Jesus is gracious to meet you where you're at and provide what you need.

This then brings us to the final aspect of hope we find in the Easter story, and really it's the one that's most important. Fourth and finally, Easter provides...

4. Hope for those who sin

Jump ahead in your Bibles to John 21. Jesus appears to the disciples while they were out fishing and, after he provides them a miraculously large catch, Jesus sits down for breakfast and addresses Peter. So please follow along as I read v. 15-17 of John 21. **“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’”**

In case you don't know the story, after Jesus was betrayed and arrested, Peter followed and waited outside the courtyard where the legal proceedings were being held. While there, three different people recognized him as one of Jesus' disciples, but instead of acknowledging it, Peter sharply denied it. Jesus had foretold Peter that before the night was over, he would deny him three times, a prediction that in the moment Peter didn't think was possible. And yet it happened. Just as Jesus had told him, as he was calling down curses upon himself in order to affirm in as strong as possible terms that he did not know Jesus, the rooster crowed, and Peter was struck with the realization he denied Christ, not once, not twice, but three times.

So when Jesus comes to Peter here in John 21 and asks him three times if he loves him, he's giving Peter a chance to repent, to reaffirm his love for Jesus, to find forgiveness for what he had done. It's an act of extreme grace. Peter was there when Jesus taught that those who denied the Son on earth would be denied by the Father on heaven. He knew what he deserved. He had sinned in a grievous way. Judas had betrayed Jesus with a single kiss; Peter had betrayed him with three denials. And yet instead of condemnation, Jesus seeks Peter out and restores him.

The greatest hope Easter gives us is hope for sinners. Jesus died and rose again so that sinners could find forgiveness. Peter had unabashedly denied his Lord. He had sinned in a way he was deeply ashamed of. Yet Christ found him and forgave him. On that cross, Jesus had suffered and died in Peter's place. The wrath of God that Peter had earned for denying Christ had been atoned for by Christ. Jesus took the punishment Peter deserved so that Peter could be restored.

Some of you have done some pretty bad things. You've sinned in ways you are ashamed of. You've made choices you regret, said words that have wounded those you love, had thoughts you wouldn't dare admit to even your closest friend. Your conscience won't let you off the hook for those things. Your mind hasn't been able to erase the memory of those words and deeds that haunt you still with guilt and shame. But Easter morning is God's message of hope to you that says, "All is not lost. Your situation is not hopeless. Jesus paid it all. He died for you. He took the punishment you deserve for all your sinful words and deeds. In his darkest hour one of Jesus' closest disciples vehemently denied him three times and yet Jesus sought him out and restored him: do you really think he would do anything less for you?"

Listen: there is no sin you've done bad enough or often enough that the grace of God in Jesus Christ can't forgive. Easter gives every man and woman hope that you need not fear the ultimate consequence of your sin: Jesus suffered, died, and rose again in your place so that peace and pardon can be yours. Death need not lead to hell: it can lead to resurrected life, eternal life with God in heaven, free from sin's power and penalty. For every sinner among us, no matter how great or small our denials have been, in word or in deed, Jesus says to us, "Do you love me?" Look at what you've done with your life and then lift up your eyes and see what I have done for you on the cross and answer, "Do you love me?"

To answer that question as Peter did, "Yes Lord I love you," is to respond in faith. It means saying, "Lord, I love you because I recognize the sinner I am and the Savior you are. I know what I've done is wrong, that I've sinned against you in my words and my actions and in my thoughts and attitudes. I've denied and betrayed you not three but three hundred thousand times. I don't deserve God's grace or mercy but I believe you've given it to me on the cross. I believe you died in my place, took the punishment of God for me as my substitute, removing God's wrath from me, so that instead of death and hell I can have eternal life in heaven. I want to stop sinning and start living for you. Change my heart so that I desire you above all else in this world, that you would be to me my most cherished treasure, my greatest joy, and my strongest desire. Forgive me my sin and transform me so that I might live for you."

Conclusion

For many of you here, you've found that hope of Easter in your life. You do not mourn like others mourn, because you know death is not the end. You do not fear because you believe Jesus is present in the midst of life's troubles and he is able to protect you. You do not doubt because Jesus has proven himself to you over and over again. And you do not live with the guilt and shame for your sin because you know Jesus died and rose again to pay for it all, to suffer the wrath of God so your sins might be forgiven. For you Easter is a time to reaffirm the hope you have in the rock-solid promises of God and the certain presence of Christ who is with you always.

But if you don't have that hope, if you can't answer with a resounding "Yes" to Jesus' question of, "Do you love me?" then isn't it time you stop searching for hope in all the places where hope has yet to be found? You will never find hope and meaning and

happiness and fulfillment for your soul in the things of this world. They can only provide temporary joy, but they'll always leave you unsatisfied and unfulfilled. You won't find what you are looking for in what is created; you can only find true hope in the Creator, and in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus came to die for you so that you can live, really live, and he rose again so that you also can rise again to new life. He calls to you this Easter morning to turn from those sinful pursuits that have left you empty and turn to him in faith, believing in who he is as the Son of God and what he has done for you by suffering death in your place on the cross.

If that's you this morning, won't you please join with me as I close our sermon with a time of prayer. Please bow our heads with me.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2013.