

“We Had Hoped”

The last couple of days had been absolutely horrendous. There was the meal – the Passover meal – in an upper room in Jerusalem. After that, everything fell apart. Jesus was arrested by men armed with swords. Fearing for their lives, every one of Jesus’ close followers ran off into the night and left Jesus to fend for Himself. Dragged from one authority to another through the night and into the wee hours of the morning, Jesus was accused, illegally tried, tortured, and sentenced to death. That very day He would be nailed to a cross – the Roman’s preferred and incredibly gruesome means of execution.

For those close followers of Jesus – Peter, Andrew, James, John, Matthew and the others, it was over. They had spent a good bit of their last 3 years following Him around. They heard Him preach and teach. They saw Him heal people, perform miracles, and even bring dead people back to life. He was the Messiah! God had sent Him to finally break the back of Rome and free the Hebrew people to rule the earth.

But all of hopes and dreams crushed now that He was dead. *It’s almost impossible for us to feel what those followers of Jesus felt.* Confusion...fear...hopelessness and despair.

But we feel some of those emotions today, don’t we? We’ve never been through anything like this coronavirus pandemic. People are frightened, uncertain about the future, feeling depressed and hopeless. I’ve never experienced an Easter like this. Confined to our homes. No family gatherings, no Maundy Thursday or Good Friday or Easter services in the church building.

Jesus was executed on Friday, and His body put in a tomb later that day. It’s now Sunday morning. Some women go to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. When they get there, they are shocked! The large stone from the entrance to the tomb has been rolled aside, and Jesus’ body is gone!

Luke, in his gospel, tells what happened next: “While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!’” (Luke 24:4-6a).

***The Christian message does not end on Friday with a dead Jesus being buried in a tomb!
There is an Easter Sunday, and a Jesus who’s alive!***

That, my friends, can give us hope! It did for those first followers of Jesus. Their hopes had died, along with Jesus.

Luke tells how later, the same day, the risen Christ appears to 2 disciples on the road to the village of Emmaus. They do not recognize Him. The three begin to discuss the events of the last few days, and what happened to Jesus. One of the men says, “The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; *but we had hoped* that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:20-21). Notice: He says, “We *had* hoped!”

Here's the incredible thing: Who is he saying this to? *Jesus Himself!* He is talking to the very One who would give them their hope back, and he didn't even know it!

Here's good news: ***In this difficult time of fear and uncertainty, Jesus walks with us to give us hope!*** Maybe we're not even aware of it. Maybe, honestly, we are not even seeking Jesus. But He wants to stand by us and give us hope in desperate times.

But what does the hope that Christ can give us look like? How is it different? What can we realistically hope? We can hope for a lot of things: we hope we don't catch the coronavirus. We hope our family is safe. We hope we can get back to work (if we're not working). We hope the economy gets back and the stock market recovers. We hope the baseball season starts, and the basketball and hockey season end!

But let's be honest: Just trusting in Jesus doesn't mean all those hopes will materialize! It's not like Christians won't get the coronavirus and others will. Or that people of faith will get their jobs back, and irreligious people won't. We're all vulnerable to sickness, economic hardship, trials that are just part of being human. If we think following Jesus will insulate us from trouble and hardship, and that Jesus will quickly fix everything, we will be disappointed big time! Please don't believe in that kind of Jesus.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus said to Jesus: "We had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel." They thought Jesus would be a military conqueror who would crush the Roman army, and make the Israelites a world power like they were under King David. But they got the wrong Jesus! His kingdom of love and peace and good will would be so different! *Don't believe in the wrong Jesus!*

So what does it look like if we have a hope based on our faith in Jesus? ***It doesn't mean that bad things won't happen, but it does mean that when bad things happen He will be there with us to provide what we need.***

We won't have to face anything alone. He will be with us. He will be able to calm our fears. He will provide our practical needs. He will give us a strength beyond our own to face whatever we have to face. He will give us a courage that we never knew we had. Trust Him. He will be sufficient for all your needs!

The other way having faith in Christ and having Christ in our life can give us hope is this – and this is a big one – through Him we can overcome even death!

That message is the heart and soul of Easter. Death could not hold Him down. And through Him, death will not be the last word in our life story either! There's a resurrection! A life beyond grave. In presence of Jesus!

There are so many Scriptures I could quote that shout out this message! Here are just a few:

“We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus” (2 Corinthians 4:14).

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26). And Jesus is the one who robbed death of its power over us!

“Death has been swallowed up in victory. ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’” (1 Corinthians 15:54-55).

Recently I got back in touch with a lady from a former church I served – a wonderful, dedicated follower of Jesus. She’s fighting cancer, and just started hospice care. We talked on the phone. She sounded cheerful. She didn’t express any self-pity, or fear. She’s not given up, but at point in the conversation she said, “I’m ready.” My friend has hope because of her strong faith in Christ. See, if we no longer fear death, we no longer have to be afraid of anything.

Over the years whenever we have an Easter Service in the church, I always have us sing Charles Wesley’s great hymn, “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”. Since this is an online service and the coronavirus is preventing us from meeting in the church building, I’d still like to highlight this Easter hymn. I miss our not being able to sing it together as a congregation. But we can still get its message!

It begins, “Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!” Then on to these verses:

“Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once he died our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where’s thy victory, boasting grave? Alleluia!”

“Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!”

Easter hasn’t been cancelled, my friends! Easter is alive and well!

Easter happens whenever any of us put our faith in Christ and experience His forgiveness, and the new life and power He gives to face whatever life throws at us.

Easter happens whenever we realize in the depths of our being that because of Him, even death cannot defeat us!

