

Easter 2020

Embrace the Hope

My in-laws lived with us for several months before Ray, my father in law, went on to be with Jesus. He was battling cancer and living in pain and yet every morning when I would come into the living room, regardless of how he was feeling or what might be ahead for the day, Ray would say, “Good morning...and it is a good morning.” May I say to you on this Easter Sunday of 2020, Good morning! And it is a good morning! Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Christ is risen and we are saved. Christ is risen and sins are forgiven. Christ is risen and we have hope.

St. John Chrysostom in his 4th century Easter homily declared, **“Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior’s death has set us free. He that was held prisoner of death has annihilated it. By descending into hell, Christ made hell captive...and so now we sing the triumphant hymn: O Death, where is your sting? O hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen and hell is overthrown. Christ is risen and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen and life reigns. Christ is risen and not one dead remains in the grave.” ...St. John Chrysostom**

I can’t hear you, but someone ought to be shouting somewhere! Christ is risen and it is a good morning! But there is a worldwide pandemic, yes but Christ is risen and all things are possible. But my business is closed and I don’t have a job. Yes, but Christ is risen and that means there is still hope. But we are sheltering in place and haven’t been out of the house in three weeks. I know, you haven’t been out of the house, but Christ came out of the tomb, alive, risen from the dead. He rose in triumph, in victory over death, hell and the grave. Jesus is risen and there is hope. Embrace the hope today.

I know this Easter is different from any other we’ve experienced. Unexpected and difficult circumstances. An uncertain future and an unsettled present. But you know what? The first Easter started out very similar to this one. What do I mean? John writes, **“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews...”**

Sound familiar? Locked in the house? The first Easter started like ours. The disciples were sheltering in place, fearful, not of a disease but fearing the Jews. They weren’t going to the temple for prayer or sacrifices, they weren’t going shopping or to eat with friends, they were

hiding in the house, behind locked doors John tells us. Talk about uncertain times. Like many of us, I think the disciples were suddenly feeling uncertain about a lot of things.

They had been convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, but how quickly things changed. Last Sunday the crowds were shouting Hosanna as Jesus rode into the city on a donkey. They must have felt vindicated. “See, the whole city now believes what we have been saying, that Jesus is the Messiah. But then came Thursday night and his arrest, and Friday, we don’t even want to think about how awful Friday was, Jesus beaten beyond recognition, crucified, buried, and now to top it off, his body is missing and we are all clueless as to what is going on. What do we do now?”

They were uncertain. Remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. They were joined by a mysterious stranger on the road, unaware it was the resurrected Christ. When he asked them what they were talking about, they told him they were discussing Jesus of Nazareth. They said, **“He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 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 24:19-21 “We thought he was the one, the Messiah who would redeem us and deliver us, but now he is dead and it looks like we were wrong.” The disciples didn’t know what to believe. They went on to tell Jesus some of the women had gone to the tomb and had a vision of angels that said he was alive, but when some of the other disciples ran to investigate they found the tomb empty, but they didn’t see anyone else.

Uncertain about Jesus whether he was the Messiah or not. Perhaps uncertain about God. “We thought he was sending us a deliverer; we thought he was fulfilling the promises made through the prophets to restore the throne of David, to liberate and save us, but once again we are disappointed. Once again we are left to wait and cry ‘How long, O Lord, how long?’”

They were uncertain about their own future. “Are we going to be next on the crucifixion list? The rulers were wanting to kill Lazarus because of his association with Jesus and the miracles, perhaps they’ll want to kill us as well. What are we going to do? We need to get back to Galilee and get back to life, back to fishing. But when will it be safe for us to leave?”

I think we can relate, can’t we? Life seems uncertain right now. Where is God? What is he doing? When is he going to get us out of this? When is it safe to leave the locked rooms behind? When do we get our old life back?

Not only was the first Easter a little uncertain, like this Easter of 2020, but there were also mixed stories about what was happening. Conspiracy theories were bouncing around the first century internet just like today. What were they supposed to believe? Have you seen these theories about the virus? Lord help me! It's a plot by the Chinese, it's a plot by the Democrats, a plot by big pharma, a plot by the Republicans, a plot by George Soros and Bill Gates, a plot to destroy the economy, a plot to close all the churches. We got "so called prophets" saying it's one thing and then another. Conspiracy theorists have got to be exhausted! What do we believe?

The first Easter had multiple stories and a share of conspiracy theories. Was there one angel or two at the tomb? Was it just one lady or multiple ladies that went to the tomb? When exactly did Mary Magdalene talk to Jesus? The chief priests and elders paid the Roman soldiers to lie and say the disciples of Jesus had stolen the body of Jesus and they spread that rumor among the Jews. Had someone just removed his body to perpetrate a hoax? Conspiracy theories about Jesus still crop up from time to time, even now. Jesus survived the crucifixion, revived, snuck out of the tomb, married Mary Magdalene and retired to the south of France or somewhere. Fake news. What are we supposed to believe? The women were certain but...and Peter and John saw something weird about the graveclothes lying in place in the empty tomb, almost like someone had passed through them instead of unwrapped them, wadded them up and cast aside. And if someone was going to steal the body, why would they unwrap the graveclothes anyway? It would have been easier to carry him. And then you've got the two men on the road to Emmaus who said they recognized him and then he just disappeared right in front of them at the dinner table! What do we believe?

And while the disciples are behind those closed doors trying to figure out what to believe, and battling with their uncertainties, John tells us, **"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." John 20:19-20**

What do we believe? I'll tell you what I believe. I'm going to believe the word of God! I'm going to believe the eyewitnesses that saw him, talked with him, ate with him. I'm going to believe the written testimony of the resurrection. It was and is the heart of the gospel message. The apostle Paul wrote to Gentile believers in Corinth that had begun to wonder about the certainty of the resurrection, **"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was**

raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also...” 1 Corinthians 15:38

I'm going to believe the testimony of these who had nothing to gain by testifying to the resurrection of Jesus except for hardship, persecution, torture and death. Nothing to gain and everything to lose and yet they proclaimed to the death the truth of his resurrection. I'm going to believe the testimony of the eyewitnesses, the testimony of the disciples, the testimony of the church through the centuries. I'm going to believe the testimony of millions of changed lives over the past 2,000 years, people who have placed their faith in Christ and have been set free from sin and darkness and made whole by his saving grace and enabled to live by his resurrection power at work in their life. I'm going to believe my own encounter with a risen Savior who has forgiven my sin and given me life and hope and peace. I'm going to embrace hope today!

Embrace the hope the disciples embraced on that first Easter Sunday. Christ is risen and everything changes. Embrace the hope that is offered on this Easter Sunday. Christ is crucified for us and risen from the dead and all things are possible. You see, the resurrection of Jesus from the grave means that everything he said is true! The bible says God made it clear that Jesus was indeed who he said he was, the Messiah and Son of God by the resurrection. Paul speaks of Jesus when he writes, **“...who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” Romans 1:4**

The resurrection was the exclamation point of the gospel of hope. “Declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.” The same one who said he could forgive my sins, who said he had come that I might have life and have it more abundantly, who said he had come to give his life as a ransom for my sins; the one who said he was the resurrection and the life and that even if I died, if I believed in him, I would live, eternally, with him; the same one who told us not to be afraid, that he was going to go and prepare a place for us and then he would come again someday and take us home; the same one who made those claims was crucified, died, was buried and on the third day he rose from the dead! Talk about making a

point! When a man dies and is buried and then on the third day walks out of the tomb alive and is seen by eye witnesses, by 500 people at one time, I'm going to pay attention to what he says.

I believe in Jesus and in the resurrection and therefore I have hope. The hope we have is not wishful thinking based on fantasy. It is hope based on the faithful promises of God now made certain and validated by Jesus' resurrection from the dead! The bible recognizes there is hope in no other. Paul said if Christ is not raised, then our faith is futile. If Christ is not raised, then we are still dead in our trespasses and sins. If Christ is not raised, then there is nothing beyond the grave. This is all a joke. Paul says, **"If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."** 1 Corinthians 15:19 But Paul quickly writes, **"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead..."** 1 Corinthians 15:20

There is hope for us because Christ is risen! It is certain. The apostle Peter writes, **"In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you..."** 1 Peter 1:3-4

Embrace the impact of living in hope. If you have put your faith in Christ and made him Savior and Lord of your life, then you have been born again into a living hope. Living hope! We don't have to live in slavery to sin because through his death on the cross he has provided salvation from sin. You've been set free. There is hope for you. Believe in him and live free from your burden of guilt and sin. We don't have to fear death because Jesus has conquered death, rising triumphant over the grave. The bible says as in one man, Adam, sin came into the world, so through one man, Jesus, comes resurrection for all who trust in him. Live in that hope of eternal life and don't be afraid. We don't have to fear life because Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He promised to be with us and never forsake us. You can face today and tomorrow with hope because Jesus walks with you. Jesus told his disciples during the last week of his life, **"Before long the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."** John 14:19

The choir sang Bill and Gloria Gaither's song, "Because He Lives, I can face tomorrow, because he lives, all fear is gone, because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives." What a powerful truth for us today. Because he lives, we have hope!

I know it may seem dark right now, but because of Jesus' death and resurrection, because he lives, we live in hope. We have been born again into that new hope. We live in light of that

hope. Because he lives, we also will live. Because he lives, death may threaten, but death no longer reigns. Jesus triumphed over death and the grave. Because he lives, Satan may threaten and try to defeat us, but Jesus triumphed over Satan when he rose from the dead. Jesus' victory is our victory. His triumph is our triumph. He lives and we also live!

If you've been living without hope, I invite you to embrace the hope that is found in Jesus Christ. This message is for you! Hope is for you. Salvation is for you. Jesus loves you and he came so that you could have life and hope and peace. He came so you wouldn't have to die in your sin and be lost. He came so you could be in relationship, in fellowship with him and with your Heavenly Father, now and forever. He came so you could live in hope. Believe it and embrace it. Open your heart to him today. Turn to him and receive him into your heart and life. Tell him you are tired of living in defeat, in sin. Tell him you want that new life, that new birth of hope that is found in Christ alone. Ask him to forgive you of your sin and surrender your life to him. His saving grace will change you from the inside out. What a glorious way to celebrate Easter with new life – resurrection life in Christ!

I said earlier the disciples that had gathered on that first Easter were wondering when they could get their old life back. Then Jesus showed up and guess what? They never got their old life back. They didn't want it back. Jesus had greater plans for them. They got a brand new life in Him. They discovered what Jesus meant when he talked about an abundant life. And fifty days later, on the day of Pentecost, they received power to become witnesses of Jesus and his resurrection that would turn the world upside down. Jesus had a better, greater plan for them and he has a better plan for you as well. Will you embrace the hope he brings; the new life he brings? Will you trust him and allow him to change you and change your future? Ask him for that new life and embrace the hope we find in a risen Savior. Let's pray together.

I want us to sing that chorus Because he lives, I can face tomorrow.

Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. Thanks for joining us. Happy Easter to you. Until the next time, "May the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen!"