

# HOPE BEGINS HERE

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Sometimes, circumstances feel hopeless!

- A bomb blast in Brussels, Belgium.
- A car runs a red light and strikes a pedestrian.
- Unrelenting rainfall bursts a levee, flooding an entire housing development.
- An argument between husband and wife suddenly turns deadly.
- A carefree experiment with drugs goes bad, and an ambulance is called.
- Firefighters stand helpless as an apartment complex is engulfed in flames.

When things go horribly wrong and the world seems to be unraveling, how do you believe in God's goodness? How do you cling to hope?

If we know who God is, we know there is hope. Always. Hope.

But what is the connection between faith and hope?

I think we can find helpful answers in the story of the first Easter—the day that Jesus rose from the dead.

## **Easter Morning**

It began like any other spring day, but the sun had barely risen when events began to shift the atmosphere dramatically.

As three of the women who had been attending to the Teacher, Jesus, walked toward the tomb to prepare His body for a proper burial, there was an earthquake. They stumbled, holding one another tightly. Regaining their balance, they reached the tomb, and found, to their surprise, that the large stone that blocked its entrance had already been rolled out of the way.

The Roman guards had fled away and the garden was deserted. The women went inside the tomb, but found it empty—His body was gone!

Assuming it had been stolen—one more effort by the authorities to desecrate His memory—Mary Magdalene ran to report their discovery to the shocked disciples, then returned with Peter and John.

John and Peter ran to the tomb, but John hesitated to enter. Peter walked right in and found the gravecloths, but nothing more. John also went in and saw the same. Frustrated and puzzled, they returned home. No one even imagined that He had risen from the dead, even though He had told them that He would.

Meanwhile, Mary rejoined the other women, waiting beside the tomb, hoping to find someone who could explain what had happened. Looking inside the tomb once more, hoping they might have missed something, they noticed two men (angels, really) sitting where the body had been.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” one of the men asked.

She said to them, “They’ve taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid Him.”

Desperate to find His body, Mary turned and walked out of the tomb. Seeing a man standing in the garden, she approached him.

It was Jesus, but she could not recognize His face. “Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”

Assuming Him to be the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you have carried Him off, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

Jesus spoke her name. Suddenly she recognized Him and ran to embrace Him. He said, “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mary immediately ran to tell them that she had seen the Master, but they didn’t believe her story.

While Mary had been speaking with Jesus, the other two women remained, astonished, in the presence of the two angels, inside the tomb. One of the angels said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him. See, I have told you.”

Perplexed and frightened, yet excited, they fled from the tomb to tell the disciples the news. Just then, Jesus met them on the way, and encouraged them to carry the message to the other disciples.

While all of this was going on, the Roman guards had gone to the chief priests to express their consternation. Had they reported this to Pilate, their lives would have been in jeopardy. The

chief priests hatched a plan to cover-up the event. They paid the soldiers to say that the disciples had come in the night and stolen the body from the tomb. This became the common story.

When the women arrived where the disciples were staying to excitedly report their meetings with Jesus, their words seemed to the others like an idle tale. They were reluctant to believe them.

Peter returned a second time to the tomb by himself, but he saw only the cloths, as they had been before. Then, as he left the tomb, he also was met by Jesus, who was alive!

That same day, Cleopas and another disciple walked to Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. Along the way, they were approached by another traveler, whom they did not recognize (it was Jesus). They discussed with Him the discouraging events of the last three days. In response, He carefully explained to them from many Scriptures how the Messiah who was to come would suffer for His people. His words stirred up their faith, and at last Jesus was revealed to them as they sat down to dinner together. And just as suddenly, He disappeared!

### **Later That Day**

Overjoyed, they hurried all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the others about their encounter. Behind a locked door, they broke down their experience, moment by moment.

Over the course of this mysterious day, Jesus had appeared to Mary, to the other women with her, to Peter, and to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Now at the end of the day, all the disciples deliberated and wondered what was happening.

In spite of the four appearances, the exposition of Scripture, the empty tomb, and the fact that Jesus had told them about all that would take place, they remained in doubt.

Then, as if to verify their report, Jesus appeared in the midst of the room. He urged them to believe and doubt no longer. He showed them the wounds in His hands and feet, and invited them to touch Him and see that He was there in the flesh. Then, as further proof, He ate in front of them.

### **In the Days That Followed**

Only Thomas was missing that evening. He was not so willing to trust their report. He needed first-hand evidence. So, a week later, when Thomas was present with them, Jesus again appeared among them. At last, Thomas was convinced. "My Lord and my God!" he cried out. And Jesus taught them all a lesson on faith in God's Word. He said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Later, He appeared again to seven of them at once beside the Sea of Galilee, where they shared breakfast together.

Finally, He brought them to a mountain in Galilee, where He was seen by over 500 of the brethren at once. He commissioned them to take the Good News of salvation to everyone, and promised that He would be with them and work through them.

He lifted His hands to bless them, saying, “You will receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” As He said these things, He began to rise bodily before their eyes, until the clouds hid Him from their sight.

Was it a hoax? A mass hallucination? No, even the disciples disbelieved the resurrection of their Lord until He proved Himself alive to them—and they had actually been told by Him that it would happen.

### **Resurrection Impact**

For forty days, Jesus had shown Himself alive to His disciples, by many unassailable proofs. Their nascent faith was now anchored solidly to the fact that He was alive, and had been glorified by the Father as Lord and Head of the Church.

From that day forward, they were willing to lay down their lives for Him, along with millions more, who had not seen Him with their physical eyes, but had trusted Him with their hearts.

Jesus Christ is alive today, and forevermore! Do not search for Christ among the dead. Plato is dead. Socrates is dead. Darwin is dead. Buddha is dead. Mohammed is dead. Gandhi is dead. But Jesus is alive!

Do not seek the living Christ among the dead gods of the earth.

Salvation comes to those who believe the testimony of Scripture. It is God who has granted us faith to believe. Do you believe what the Lord has said? Do you believe that Christ paid the death penalty for your sin and arose from the dead to prove He has sufficient power to save you?

Believe. Doubt no longer. Let hope arise.

### **An Answer for Today**

On the basis of this resurrection story, let’s return to the questions with which I began this message:

When things go horribly wrong and the world seems to be unraveling, how do you believe in God's goodness? How do you cling to hope? What is the connection between faith and hope?

The followers of Jesus had pinned their hopes—not only for their personal futures, but for the future of their people, the nation of Israel—on the success of Jesus' ministry. After less than four years, all that seemed to have been turned upside down. He was taken from them and killed. What was their hope then? The same treatment?

If we know who God is, and that He is alive and watching over us, we know there is hope. Always. Hope.

The presence of hope isn't determined by your feelings, but by the presence of God and the promises He has made.

You may say, "This isn't what I planned!"

But God has said, *"My plans are completely different from yours... And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.* (Isaiah 55:8; NLT)

In the midst of your circumstances, God has something else going on, and it is designed to draw you to Him.

Many Christians pray, "Lord, make me more like you." And so we should. But be aware, God may use your family, or your job, to mold you into His likeness. What if that struggle is the chisel God is using to shape your faith and character?

People want deeper relationships. Well, go through a struggle together to the point of resolution, and your relationship will deepen.

Do you want a deeper relationship with God? He will take you through a struggle that leads you to lean on Him more; that will deepen your relationship with Him, that will show you His grace more clearly.

What if that struggle you are going through *right now* is designed, at least in part, to change you and deepen your walk with God?

In the Book of Proverbs it is written, *"We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps."* (Proverbs 16:9; NLT)

He has promised to work all things together for your good. God is involved in what's going on in your life.

You say, “But I don’t see God at work in this. I don’t think God would do this to me.”

Consider this: Every good garden needs a little manure.

The fact that things stink right now does not mean life will never again be fragrant.

Would God stop short of anything that would draw us closer to Him? Isn’t that why He made us in the beginning—to be close to Him? Isn’t that why He was willing to sacrifice His Son for us?

Your season of trial may seem long, but it is only a season. Just a chapter in your life. It will close and a new chapter will begin. For faith is a long story, which God our Savior is still writing.

Now, don’t use that as an excuse to disengage; you need to endure and do what you can do, then God will do the rest.

Caught in a violent and unrelenting storm, the ship’s crew turned in desperation to their captain to plead, “Sir, shouldn’t we pray that God will rescue us?”

“Yes,” the captain answered. “Pray that He will and row like He won’t.”

We need to pray that God will rescue us, and work hard to rescue ourselves at the same time.

The problem commonly is this: the immediate circumstances capture our attention and blind us to the possibilities beyond this moment.

In just such moments, here is how the Apostle Paul prayed: *“I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the wonderful future [God] has promised to those He called.”* (Ephesians 1:18; NLT) When shrouded in darkness, we need to be flooded with light in order to see!

Stop looking with the eyes on your face, and start looking with the eyes of your heart to see what God has promised, to see what cannot be seen with your physical eyes.

## **Dawning Hope**

Hope is the product of faith—faith in things we don’t see.

*“What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.”* (Hebrews 11:1; NLT)

What makes us lose hope is what we're seeing and experiencing. ("I can't see a way out. I can't see an end to this.")

What restores our hope is seeing the faithfulness and grace of God. Seeing that God is a Redeemer, who is always working, in every kind of situation, for our good.

Hope is the product of faith in things we don't see.

*"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."* (Jeremiah 29:11; NLT)

If we could see it already, it would require no faith. Faith sees beyond the circumstances. Faith sees the ability and willingness of God to help.

We may put our faith in medicine, or discipline, or intent. That's not wrong, but that is not enough. Your faith is made for more. We should aim higher. Put your faith in God, who gives wisdom and power, for it is better to trust in God than in men.

Put your situation in God's hands. Pray about it. If we ask for wisdom, He has promised to give it. If we ask for comfort, He has promised to give it. If we ask for His help, He has promised to give it.

The end may not look like what we imagined, but it will be good. God has promised.

And as evidence, we see Christ, risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of God, preparing to return to rescue His people and establish righteousness on the earth.

Now, after all I have said and read to you, your circumstances are still your circumstances. But can't you see the dawn of hope? Hasn't the sky above you begun to grow lighter?

Now, I pray that the eyes of YOUR heart will be filled with light—to see beyond the present darkness, to see better the path you have been given to walk today, and to see Jesus high and lifted up, interceding for you.

Come, put your trust in Him. Call upon His name. Take His outstretched hand and let Him lead you into the full light of day. Hope begins here.