

“HOPE ON THE ROAD OF DESPAIR” **(Luke 24:13-35)**

Happy Easter everyone – it is so good to see you all here on resurrection Sunday. On Good Friday we gathered to observe the death of Jesus, and today we gather to celebrate His triumphant victory over the grave and ponder the profound implications His resurrection has for our lives today. Today I want to talk to you about finding hope on the road of despair. Between 1930 and 1970 a number of hydroelectric dams were built across the United States. One of those dams was scheduled to be built across a valley in the state of Maine, and in the valley was a small, picturesque town named Flagstaff. Flagstaff was known for its pretty appearance – every house and store was well maintained, every sidewalk was swept, and every yard was mowed.

Although it would take more than 20 years for the dam to be built, the people of the town would be forced to relocate before their town was submerged in water. During the time between the decision to build the dam and its completion, the town fell into disrepair – the paint chipped – people did not mow their yards – and broken windows were not replaced. Instead of a pretty little town, it became an eyesore, and the reason was obvious. One resident said, “Where there’s no hope in the future, there is no work in the present.”

One of our greatest needs in life is hope. Someone has said, “A person can live forty days without food, four days without water, four minutes without air, but only four seconds without hope. Hope is the power that keeps us going in the toughest times of life.” Years ago a newspaper in Nashville was going to do a series of articles on people who were suffering from a broken heart, and they asked local church pastors to submit the names of people they knew who had suffered a broken heart. One perceptive pastor sent the newspaper the Nashville telephone directory.

Everyone living in a fallen, broken world has felt the pain of a broken heart. The break-up of a marriage or relationship can break your heart – the death of someone you love can break your heart – not being able to fulfill a lifelong dream because of health or unforeseen circumstances can break your heart. Proverbs puts it well when it says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is the tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12). All of us, at one time or another, knows what it’s like to lose hope that anything will change or get better.

It would be hard to find a pair of people more broken-hearted and hopeless than the two men walking on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. They were part of a small band of disciples who had given up everything to follow Jesus. For centuries the Jewish people had been looking for a Messiah to come and restore Israel to her former glory. Israel had lived under the rule of series of foreign nations, and were presently in bondage to the Roman Empire. When they heard Jesus talk about establishing a kingdom on earth, they fully embraced Him as their conquering hero – the one who would lead a revolt and free them from bondage. Their expectation reached fever pitch when one-week earlier Jesus rode into Jerusalem and was greeted by the people as their king.

But everything began to unravel in the Upper Room when Jesus began talking about His death. He said that one of them would betray Him and everyone would forsake Him. A few hours later in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was arrested and then sentenced to death. Any hopes that He might call down angels from heaven to deliver Him were dashed when Jesus was nailed to the cross and died. All of the hopes and expectations of the two disciples were crushed, and by Sunday there was nothing to do but return back home and reevaluate their lives.

In verses 13-16 we read... “Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.”

As the two are walking along a road to Emmaus – about seven miles west of Jerusalem – they’re suddenly joined by a stranger. It was Jesus, but they didn’t recognize Him. Why not? For one thing, they weren’t looking for Jesus – He was dead and buried – and the furthest thing from their mind was that He was alive. It’s kind of like when you’re looking for something and it’s right in front of you. That’s one possibility – they weren’t expecting to see Jesus and when He appeared they didn’t recognize Him.

But the real reason they didn’t recognize Jesus is found right there in the text... they “*we’re kept* from recognizing Him.” We don’t know exactly how Jesus concealed His identity, but He did so because He wanted them to first believe in His resurrection by faith, not by sight.

In John 20:29 Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed.” Jesus’ resurrection took place 2000 years ago – we didn’t see it happen – but by faith we believe it happened because of the historical record found in the Bible. Several well-known atheists have set out to disprove the resurrection, only to convert to Christianity after analyzing all the facts. There is an abundance of evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, including the fact that He made at least eleven different appearances after His resurrection to hundreds of people. Believing in the resurrection does not require blind faith, but faith based on solid evidence. The proof is there, but God delights in faith and rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

Verses 17-18... “He asked them, ‘What are you discussing together as you walk along?’ They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, ‘Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?’” They have no idea they’re talking to Jesus. “Where have you been?” they say. “How could you not know all the things that have been happening?”

Rather than reveal Himself to them, Jesus begins asking them questions... “What things are you guys talking about?” Part of what made Jesus such a great teacher is that he asked questions – in the gospels He asks over 300 questions. Questions have a way of getting to the root of you believe and feel. Jesus used questions to help people think through what they’re saying and draw their own conclusions.

Verses 19-24... “‘What things?’ he asked. ‘About Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘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. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.’”

Notice the words in verse 21... “but we had hoped.” They had built certain expectations about who Jesus

would be and what He would do... “We had hoped that Jesus would redeem Israel, and we would rule and reign with Him. This was not the way it was supposed to turn out.” They’re sorting through how their expectations are not matching up with reality... “What happened? How did the one we put all our hopes in end up dying on a cross between two thieves? And now we’re really confused because some of the disciples say that Jesus’ body is not in the tomb.”

Finally, in verses 25-26 the stranger speaks... “He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’” Jesus is not so much calling them fools, as He is exposing the foolishness of their thinking. All that happened the previous week – from the triumphal entry to the crucifixion and resurrection – it was all predicted by the Old Testament prophets, but they didn’t see it. What they saw were all the prophecies about a ruling and reigning Messiah, but they did not see a suffering Messiah. They saw the Messiah wearing a crown, not carrying a cross.

We sometimes do the same thing with the Bible. We focus the verses that don’t demand too much of us – the positive, uplifting verses we put in plaques and hang on the wall – and we forget about the verses that talk about taking up our cross, experiencing trials and tribulations, and being persecuted for bearing Jesus’ name. The Bible does indeed teach that a glorious future awaits believers, but it also teaches that future glory is preceded by present suffering.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were right to see a glorious, ruling Messiah – He indeed will one day rule and reign over the earth – but they didn’t see or didn’t want to see that He must first suffer and die for the sins of the world. They lost perspective of the big picture, and when you lose perspective, you lose hope. Hope is the confident expectation that one day everything will be okay, and there will be no more pain of suffering or sorrow. The Apostle Paul said that when we enter into our eternal glory it will make our present troubles seem light and momentary in comparison. Knowing that a better day lies ahead gives us hope and confidence in the midst of suffering.

In verse 27 Jesus continues... “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Some have called this the greatest Bible study in history, as Jesus takes them on a survey of the Old Testament and shows them all that was predicted about the Messiah – both His suffering and His glory. Jesus begins with the books of Moses – the first five books of the Bible – and then covers the rest of the Old Testament written by the prophets.

- He may have started with Genesis 22 where Abraham placed Isaac – his beloved son – on the altar as a sacrifice, foreshadowing how Christ would be placed on the cross as our sacrifice.
- He then, no doubt, talked about the Passover lamb in Exodus whose blood was shed to atone for the sins of the people, just as Christ’s blood would provide forgiveness for our sins.
- He went on, most likely, to talk about the tabernacle ceremonies and sacrifices, all of which pointed to the death of Christ.
- He may have lingered at Psalm 22 or Isaiah 53 which picture the suffering Messiah. Everything in the Old Testament looks forward to Jesus.

Jesus wants them to see that His death was not a surprise – but a part of God’s plan all along. If Jesus had not gone to the cross, we’d still be in our sins and separated from God. It was necessary that He die to atone for our sin so that we can be reconciled with God.

The story continues in verses 28-29... “As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus

continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, ‘Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.’ So he went in to stay with them.” They don’t want their conversation to end. All that the stranger told them was breathing new life into their souls – the pieces to the puzzle were starting to come together and they don’t want Him to leave.

Verse 30... “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.” There was something about the way Jesus broke the bread with His nail-pierced hands and gave thanks that opened their eyes. “It’s you! You’re alive!” And as soon as they recognize Him, He disappeared from their sight. He accomplished what He came to do – to open their eyes spiritually to the truth of God’s Word, and physically to the reality that He’s alive.

In verse 32... “They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’” “Yeah, I had that same feeling – like a light was going on in my soul – He made the pages of scripture come alive and seeing the big picture of God’s plan made my heart race with excitement and joy.”

They were so excited that verses 33-35 says, “They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.” It’s seven miles back to Jerusalem, it’s dark, and they’re exhausted – but they’re running on adrenaline now and nothing’s going to stop them. They burst through the door where the other disciples are staying, and before they can tell their story, the other disciples say, “It’s true! Jesus is alive!” They say, “We know, praise God, He appeared to us too,” and they told them all about their encounter with Jesus on the road.

Every time someone saw Jesus after His resurrection, the first thing they did was to go and tell others. How could you not? One of the greatest evidences of the resurrection is the many eyewitnesses who testified to seeing Jesus, and seeing Him alive transformed them from hopeless, downcast disciples into evangelistic dynamos who proclaimed the gospel to the ends of the earth.

This is such a great story because we’ve all walked on the same road as these disciples. We’ve all been on the road of despair and it’s a tough road to travel. Maybe you’re on that road this morning. If so, there four great things we learn from this story that can give us hope.

First, we learn that **Jesus wants to meet you on your road.** Jesus knows just how you feel because He’s walked in your shoes. He knows, more than you can imagine, what it’s like to suffer.

- In the garden, the night before He went to the cross, He felt the weight and despair of the cross, knowing that all the sins of mankind would be placed upon Him and our sins would cause the Father turn away and forsake Him.
- He knows what it’s like to be betrayed and rejected and humiliated.
- On the cross Jesus suffered physically and spiritually and emotionally. As a human He experienced heartache and sorrow you experience, and He wants to meet you on your road of despair and walk with you.

Second, **if you release your expectations of how life is supposed to go, Jesus will show you what**

really matters in life. Before Jesus joined them on the road, these disciples were deep in conversation, desperately trying to make sense of a cause they had devoted their life to – a cause that was now dead. They expected Jesus to redeem Israel, but He did not fulfill their expectations.

If we're honest we all have expectations about how life should go – we expect that if we give our lives to God, He will bless us – He will give us good health and a good marriage – He'll protect our loved ones and provide for our needs. When your loved one dies, when your marriage ends in divorce, when your health declines, when your job is lost, you're blindsided. You feel let down because this is not how things were supposed to go.

The disciples should have known – because Jesus told them many times – that the path to glory is suffering, and the cross comes before the crown. He explained how His suffering and death was all laid out in the Old Testament, but because they expected something else, they could not see it.

Jesus wanted them, and us, to know that as long as we live in a fallen, broken world there will be pain and sorrow. But in the midst of pain and sorrow, there is hope – and that hope is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus. To have and experience this hope you must first come to terms with the fact that your sins have separated you from God. The Bible says that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's holy standards, and the penalty for sin is death – eternal separation from God in hell. That's the bad news – the good news is that God sent His Son Jesus to die for our sins – to take our place on the cross.

Here's an illustration that helps explain this. Suppose that you were in the hospital dying of cancer and I came to you and said, "I love you and I want you to live. I'll take the cancer cells from your body and put them into my body." If I were able to do that, what would happen to me? I would die. And what would happen to you? You would live – you would live because I took the thing that was causing your death, placed it upon myself and died as your substitute.

That's what Christ did. He came into the world to be like us – to live like us – to identify with us. Jesus was just like you and me, human flesh and all, the only difference was that He had no sin. Therefore, He was the perfect person to take our place on the cross. On the cross all of my sin and your sin was placed upon Jesus. and He died in our place. All He asks you to do is trust in Jesus as your Savior from sin – to say, "There's nothing else in the world I can trust, there is nothing I can do myself to save me – I trust in Jesus alone."

What really matters in life is that you are prepared to meet Jesus in the next life, and you can be prepared by receiving Jesus as your Savior from sin. That's what really matters. Once we see that, we are better able to release our expectations about how life should go and enjoy the present blessings we have in Christ and look forward to the eternal blessings to come. The Apostle Peter calls Christian hope a "living hope" – it resuscitates us and breathes life into our being and motivates us to live in light of the future, even as we deal with the pain and losses of this life.

This leads us to a third great truth this story gives us is that **if you see Jesus as He truly is, your life will take on a whole new direction.** The disciples were traveling on the road of despair – they had given up all hope and were going back to their former life in Emmaus. But when they encounter Jesus, they get right back on the same road, only this time it is a road of hope and rejoicing. What changed is that they saw the resurrected Jesus.

Easter changes everything! The Apostle Paul said, “If Christ is not risen from the dead, our faith is useless – there is no reason to go to church or pray or sing. If Christ is not risen, we are still in our sins – a dead person can’t save anyone. If Jesus is still in the tomb, then there is no hope for the future and no meaning for the present. It means that this life is all there is – we live, we die. If Jesus didn’t really rise from the grave, then the Christian faith is empty and void – Jesus is just another religious guru who came and went.”

Jesus’ resurrection authenticates everything He did on the cross for you and me – that He paid the penalty of sin for us and by believing in Him we can be forgiven and made right with God. Jesus’ resurrection assures us that this is not all there is to life. One day we will rise just as Jesus did, and all suffering and pain will end. All the wrongs in life will be made right. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. Knowing this gives us perspective in the midst of pain and suffering.

The final great truth of this story is that **Jesus will not force His way into your life – you must invite Him in.** After Jesus explained the meaning of Easter to these two disciples, and as they neared the village of Emmaus, Jesus acted as if He was going farther down the road, but they urged Him strongly to stay with them for the night. Jesus wants to come into your life, but He won’t force His way in. He respects your choice. He offers hope – He offers eternal life – He offers you a new direction – but you must decide to accept what He offers.

Revelation 3:20 says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me” (NKJV). Today the Lord is knocking at the door of your heart. He wants a relationship with you. He wants to give you a fresh start and a new direction. He wants to come in and dine with you – have fellowship with you. But you must open the door of your heart – He won’t force His way in.

The question is: What road are you on this morning? Are you on the road to Emmaus? Have you given up on hope? Or are you on the road back to Jerusalem – the road of hope? Maybe things are going real and you’re overflowing with hope. If so, thank Him right now that He’s given you that living hope.

But maybe you’re walking on a road that you never thought you’d have to walk, weighed down by burdens you never thought you have to carry. And now today a stranger comes to walk alongside you and shares a message of hope, and invites you, if you are willing, to let Him into your life and fill you with hope. Like the disciples, you can feel a burning in your heart as the truth of what you’ve heard rings true. He knocks at the door of your heart – if you invite Him in, He will give you hope on the road of despair.