

## Hope Made Real

A sermon on Luke 24:1-12

Would you pray with me?

Living and Loving God, you have brought us to this time and this place to celebrate the Resurrection, but you also know what is on our hearts. Be with us here today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We journeyed quite a ways this Lent, didn't we.

Now, usually, this is the place in the sermon where I summarize the sermon series, remind y'all what we've been talking about for the last month or so, before I transition to talking about a practical application of what we've learned. Y'all have heard me preach before. You know how this goes.

But our journey this Lent wasn't through a sermon series. Sure, we talked about preparing ourselves for new life, about resetting our minds so that we thought more like God, about reflecting on the places in our lives that call us to repentance, about learning to value our emotions, but that's not the real journey we went on. As Salem Church, we have gone on the difficult journey of walking with another during their time of grief.

Now, I know that this is a journey that you all are practiced at. You have learned how to hold one another in prayer, and talk to each other, and to support one another in love. You do it beautifully. I know that Sue is so thankful for all the support you have given her so far and for all the support you will give her in the future.

But I have also seen on your faces the impact that Norah's sickness and passing has had on you. It is another unbearable loss that you as a community have been asked to bear and I have seen it weigh on many of you. We have prayed, of course. We've given all that we could, of course. But in the end, this was a situation that was out of our control and that makes it all the harder to bear. Talking about resurrection, about welcoming new life, at a time like this... well, that seems like too much to bear too. There are moments when Easter seems like a cruel joke instead of a wonderful promise.

And yet.

The women went to the tomb anyway.

The women, the three women, had suffered an unbearable loss, but they knew what needed to be done. They didn't exactly know how they were going to do it, what with the stone and all, but they went to the tomb with the spices and everything that was needed to prepare the body. As far as they knew, all hope was gone. As far as they knew, death had won.

Because we know what to expect from this world, right? No one escapes without some pain, some suffering, and no one escapes alive. We know what the world looks like, how it works, and we can tell you that time and again, hope dies and death wins. It's awful, but it's true. It's

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the truth that the women knew that morning. And I think, over the next few weeks, we will have moments when we feel like those women at sunrise on Easter morning before Easter had arrived.

And it's okay that we feel that way. Like Mary spilling her perfume on Jesus' feet, we need to see our grief, and name it, and feel it. But the beautiful thing about Easter Sunday is that, even though we feel deep grief, we know that we don't have to feel it forever.

The beautiful thing about Easter Sunday is that death does not win.

What an insane thing to say. What a difficult thing to receive.

Death does not win.

This morning, we hear from Isaiah, a book that the early church reached back to time and again to help them understand what had happened, and in Isaiah, we hear about the new thing God is doing, making a new heaven and a new earth.

A place where no one will ever cry those desperate tears of loss and loneliness again.

A place where no one will fail to live out their days.

A place where what we do matters, where you won't build just for others to live in or plant just for others to eat.

A place where children will be born into a world of goodness, not a world of horrors.

And this place, it is utterly unlike the world we know. Lions will eat straw. Wolves will eat grass. And they won't hurt or destroy at any place on the Lord's holy mountain. These words tell us that whatever goodness awaits us, it is unlike anything we know.

The empty tomb is unlike anything we know.

But.

It is not so different from our hopes.

We have hoped and we have prayed for this world that Isaiah talks about. We hope for this world where God's goodness and love win, where there is nothing in this world that can separate us from the ones we love, where our hearts are free from the things that keep us from one another and where sickness and disaster can't touch us, any of us, anymore. We long for that new world deep in our bones, that world where death does not win, even as we know that this world is not that world.

And that is why we celebrate Easter. Because, for a moment, just for a flash, we get to see the reality of that world, even as we continue to live in this one. That moment where the tomb is empty, when the wildest of our hopes suddenly becomes a reality, when the angels turn to us and say, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen!" that moment tells us that this world has got it all wrong. It's the world that Isaiah talks about that

wins out in the end. That hope in our bones is made real on Easter Sunday morning. That is why we sing our alleluias.

So, what do we do with this hope-made-real, this new life, this new creation that we are given on Easter Sunday?

Well, we receive it.

Because the thing about hope is that when you receive it, even just a taste, it will set you off down a road of making that hope into a reality. When you get a glimpse of how good things can be, you start trying to make good things happen. In the empty tomb, in the Risen Christ, we get a glimpse of how good things can be and we are called to do what we can to make that goodness into a reality in our own lives.

The good news for you is that that goodness is already alive and well in you. I've seen Easter alive in your hearts throughout this past Lent and I know I'll see it throughout my last few weeks here. You will continue to support Sue and Chuck and one another through this loss. The very fact that you feel it so deeply means that God has given you the gift of kind and caring hearts. When you feel the realities of this world start to harden them, turn back to Easter and let God soften them again. We could use some softer hearts these days.

And the very fact that you are able to come together in these moments of crisis means that God has given you the gift of community. God has brought you all together and tied you together strongly. I imagine that this moment is not the only moment that God will hold you together through. When the realities of this world start to pull you apart, turn back to Easter and let God unite you again. We could use more unity these days.

And the very fact that you were so willing to give food and a helping hand to Sue means that God has given you the gift of service. You see a need and you leap to fill it and that is a good and joyful thing. When the reality of this world overwhelms you with an abundance of needs, turn back to Easter and let God strengthen you for the task at hand. We could always use more servants.

Now, this doesn't mean that you don't have room to grow. After all, the world that we long for is so different from the world we have. But that is the other miracle of Easter—it shows us that God will work in us in ways that we cannot expect. God will be with us as we heal from a grief that we think cannot be healed. God will open our hearts to hear the voices of those we never thought we would listen to. And God will guide us as we seek to solve problems the world deems unsolvable.

The thing about this new life, this Easter life, is that it's always bigger than what we imagine, always more than what we imagine. But Easter shows us that it's not too much for God. After all, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. There's nothing, not our faults and failings, not the unfair ways of the world, not a single thing that triumphs over God in the end. In the end, God's love wins.

Alleluia.