

# Easter Hope

## Frankton – 4/5/15

Scripture: John 20.1-10 Resurrection of Jesus

Proposition: Jesus' resurrection gives us hope for tomorrow

I know it's an old joke, but I still like it. Two guys had been golfing buddies for over 40 years. One of them passed away. The remaining one wished he could talk to his buddy. He wanted to ask him about heaven. What was there? Who was there? Were there golf courses in heaven? He got his wish. One day his deceased friend came back in spirit to visit with him. They had a great reunion, once the living man got over his shock of seeing his deceased friend. They talked a long while, but finally the man asked the question of his deceased friend: Are there golf courses in heaven? The spirit replied, "Oh, my yes, there are great courses in heaven. Beautiful scenery. Challenging holes. Absolutely fantastic courses. There's only one concern." "What's that," replied the living one." His deceased friend answered, "You and I have a tee time next week."

What could be more powerful than news from the other side of death? Easter is that and more. Not an email or a text or a visit from a deceased friend, but a living message. Not from man, but from God. Not from hell, but from heaven. It's GOOD NEWS! Easter Sunday is the day we gather to celebrate that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb to show us that Jesus had risen. He had been resurrected. We celebrate that our hopes are alive in the resurrection of Jesus. The book of Hebrews speaks of this hope as: [SLIDE] *an anchor for our soul*. [6.19] This hope from the resurrection is often the unspoken strength that allows us to rise each day and face the uncertainties of life. In the midst of our losses and let downs, we can anchor our souls with divine strength. The hope of Easter is a hope that meets us in the real world.

When we read earlier from the Gospel of John, we found that our story doesn't begin in the light of day; it begins at before dawn, when it's still dark, a place far less clear, a place far more personal. It begins with an individual, [SLIDE] *Mary*. Isn't it interesting how God uses ordinary individuals to showcase his greatest events? Now, to be honest, we actually don't know much about Mary; we can surmise some. She know was from the fishing village of Magdala along west side of the Sea of Galilee. Many folks say that she was not what you'd call your traditionally religious person. Some say she had a wealthy background. Regardless, of her background, nothing could protect her from the harsh realities of the world. Have you ever had moments like Mary Magdalene? Moments when the world seemed like a very cruel place – a place of broken promises, unfulfilled dreams, big disappointments? The world can be a very difficult place to live, and the Devil uses those difficult moments to make you feel hopeless and despairing. The Devil wants you to say to yourself, "There is no God. There is no hope."

Mary was a woman living at a time when her culture found women good scapegoats to blame on which to place its shame. Her culture said that omen were somehow more easily separated from God, so for Mary there was little impetus to hope on her own. Yet as many people have come to find out, out most oppressive powers aren't just cultural or social or political, they are personal and spiritual. Some traditions say that Mary was a scarlet sinner. Some traditions say that Mary was demon infested. This was before the day that a new presence came to town, a presence that

proved more powerful than all the powers around her and within her. Jesus had come to town and saw into her soul, and cast out those demonic powers. Jesus had done something for her that no one else could ever do, and she could never forget. No one ever loved Jesus quite like Mary Magdalene. The part that love plays in this story is extraordinary. Driven by love, it was Mary who was first at the tomb that first Easter morning. She came in love, but also in darkness; and not just the darkness of the sky, but the darkness of her soul. Her love for Jesus may have been strong, but after his death, her hope couldn't see anything left to hold onto. Jesus was gone and the world without him was dark, dark around her, dark within her.

This is where the Easter message finds us – in the darkness of our world. It's a world not always safe and satisfying; it's a world where the love of family and friends can fall short, prove frail and fragile. It's a world where people we love leave us far too soon. Easter enters just such a dark world. The love of God is a deep love that finds us in the darkness and lifts us up. It's not the love of fairy tales, but a love that reaches into the real world. If you've ever found it hard to see that love you can appreciate Mary. You see, Easter begins with one whose hopes appear sealed in the harsh reality of a tomb and whose expectations are once again left in our natural world. Even when she arrives at the tomb and finds the huge stone somehow removed from the tomb, what does she think? I think only one of two things may have entered her mind. She may have thought that the Jews leaders had taken away Jesus's body; that, not satisfied with killing him on a cross, they were inflicting further indignities on him. Or she may have thought that the tomb robbers found Jesus tomb and took his body. She couldn't perceive of anything more. She certainly could not perceive a risen Jesus.

But then she felt a presence beside her. She is without hope, so all she sees is a gardener. We know it's really Jesus. But because of her loss, longing, and hopelessness, she can't see clearly through her sadness. Her head and her heart are turned downward in her tears. The hope of Easter begins in that place where it's hard for us to expect much, to see clearly, to recognize God's presence through our tears and trials, our fears and frustrations. Then she hears her name in a familiar voice. And it's Jesus. What a turn-around for Mary! One minute God is dead, and there is no hope. But then she sees that Jesus is alive. God is not dead. There is hope! There is a reason to be joyful, to be hopeful, and to be optimistic. Jesus was alive and well, and that's what changed her. Her hero was alive.

The voice of Easter morning would penetrate Mary's darkness. What Mary saw that Easter morning would change her life forever, and can change ours. Jesus came to Mary because she needed him. We all need him. He knew better than she did that we all need a risen savior. She was only the first to see him. She reached for him, and he told her not to. She couldn't cling to his body because it was his heavenly body. It was a body not limited by mortality. It was his unlimited presence, which would now transcend time and space as a living hope for all the world. What is the living hope that changed Mary's life? That can change our life?

In the risen Christ Mary discovered the living hope that **[SLIDE] God** can overcome any powers over my past. Mary knew about the powers that can define our past. She had been oppressed by her culture and some say oppressed by her demons. They were powers bigger than her. They were the powers over her past. We all know something of the power over our past, the shame that tethers us down from the hope of who we long to be. When you look into your past and consider all the mistakes you have made in life, all the words and actions you wish you could take back, but you

can't, you cannot help but feel a sense of hopelessness. "Is there any way I can change the past?" The answer is no. What's done is done. And then we feel what Mary felt – an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and despair.

A teacher asked her class what each wanted to become when they grew up. She got all the usual answers: "President," "fireman," "teacher." One by one they answered until it became Levi's time. The teacher asked, "Levi, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "Possible," Levi responded. "Possible?" asked the teacher. "Yes," Levi said, "my mom is always telling me I'm impossible. When I grow up I want to be possible." Mary wanted to be "possible." Then Jesus spoke into her life with power. He looked her in the eyes, confronted the evil powers oppressing Mary and set her free.

But there was more than just the authority and power of heaven, there was the LOVE of heaven. Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me? What if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees? The living hope of Jesus is that we never have to be defined by our past, tethered to our failures. God can overcome any powers over my past.

In the risen Christ Mary discovered the living hope that [SLIDE] God will be present with me, each and every day. The deepest comfort in life is not in material stuff but in meaningful companionship. What comforts us most is to know that we're not alone. The great news of Easter is that God can be present with me each and every day. St. Augustine is quoted as saying of Jesus' ascension into heaven, "You ascended before our eyes. We turned to grieve only to find you in our hearts." Jesus' presence didn't leave; it was being loosed. He wasn't merely the hope of one woman, but the hope of the world. You and I never have to feel alone again. Christ rose so that all who receive him could have the very presence of God within us, among us. He's here right now, when you go home, lay down, rise up, and go to work.

Lastly, in the risen Christ Mary discovered the living hope that [SLIDE] God has a future for me to be forever with Him. Jesus knew that death is born of spiritual separation, which is the final enemy he came to defeat. The hope that changed Mary's life was that she would be with Jesus forever. In Valladolid, Spain, where Christopher Columbus died in 1506, stands a monument commemorating the great discoverer. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the memorial is a statue of a lion destroying one of the Latin words that had been part of Spain's motto for centuries. Before Columbus made his voyages, the Spaniards thought they had reached the outer limits of earth. Thus their motto was "Ne Plus Ultra," which means "No More Beyond." The word being torn away by the lion is "Ne" or "no," to make it read "Plus Ultra." Columbus had proven that there was indeed "more beyond." The world could never be understood the same. In the same way, Christ proved there was "more beyond" and life and our future can never be understood the same way as before his life and death and resurrection.

There's a really old story of a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer and had been given three months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die - something we all should be doing all of the time. So she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what she wanted to be wearing. The woman also

told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly. "What's that?" came the pastor's reply. "This is very important." The woman continued, [SLIDE] "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the woman not knowing quite what to say. "That shocks you, doesn't it?" the woman asked. Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor. The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, and let's be honest, food is an important part of any church event, spiritual or otherwise, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say 'you can keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork, I knew that something great was about to be given to me. It wasn't Jell-O or pudding. It was cake or pie or cobbler - something with substance. So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them. Something better is coming, so keep your fork too."

If we want to follow Jesus into life with God, he invites us to come enter his death. Eternal life with God does not come as an earnings program, or an enhancement program, it's an exchange program. If we offer our life to Christ we will receive his life within us. And we'll need our fork for the next life we enter.