

Easter 2024: Hope for the Rest of Us, Matthew 24:1-12, 3/31/24

Have you ever been at a gathering with a group of people where you felt like you didn't belong? You didn't fit in? My first wedding I ever officiated was a couple from my church in the DC Metro Area who worked on Capitol Hill, they were a power couple- bright, good looking. And they both came from families in politics. The wedding was in Nantucket, which is mostly a place for the rich and well connected. Here I am surrounded by rich, connected political families, and I'm by myself, a pastor at my first wedding, wearing a cheap suit from the Burlington Coat Factory. I did not belong. And I'm so nervous I was just thinking "OK, just read what is in front of you Nate and don't screw this up." And so the wedding begins, I ask everyone to stand as the bride processes down the aisle, and then I went on with the ceremony... "We are gathered here today..." Everything is going OK...except that I suddenly notice about 15 minutes in that everyone is standing. And in my head, I'm like why is everyone standing? And then I realized that I never said those little words after the bride comes down the aisle, "Please be seated." I was so mortified... after the wedding we go to the reception- Everyone is like, "Oh, you're the guy who made us stand." Suffice to say, I too have experienced that feeling like I don't belong.

You know, there are some of you that might just feel like you don't belong here this morning. You might feel like this isn't your crowd, your place... "These are religious people. These are people who have their lives altogether, or these are people who don't have struggles, or these are people who might vote differently than me." Maybe you feel the same way about Jesus. "Jesus is for those who don't have problems like me, or those people that have rigid morals, or people that have blind faith. Not people like...I don't belong, I don't think Jesus is for me."

What I hope to show you in our Scripture passage we just read from Luke 24 you are wrong about that. In fact, you are just the kind of person, with just the kind of issues and experiences and sensibilities that Jesus loved, accepted, and used to change the world! What we see here, is that some of the first people who encounter the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus, some of the first followers of Jesus, some of the people in the first church - were people just like you. Let me show you three of them.

The Discouraged

Luke 24 opens this chapter with a group of women bringing spices they had prepared to the tomb of Jesus. We think of spices in terms of something we put our food, but before the modern-day embalming process, burial spices were used for aromatic purposes in the tomb. It's obvious but needs to be said that these women we not coming for Easter Brunch with a risen Jesus, they were coming to mourn a dead Jesus.

Who were these women? We know from verse 10 and the other gospels some of their names, one of whom was Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was deeply troubled before Jesus met her, Luke 8 describes her as having seven demons...Jesus sees this woman, has compassion on her and heals her. Jesus transformed her life and she left everything to follow Jesus. This is someone who was deeply devoted to Jesus. Also with her was Mary, the mother of Jesus. There is no love like the love of a mother. Now here these two women are- coming to grieve at the

tomb of the crucified Jesus. Not only did they love Jesus as a friend and son, they believed that he came to save them and rescue their people as the promised Messiah. All their hopes and dreams were dashed and replaced with profound despair. Maybe you can relate to their heartbreak. Maybe you've lost someone you love and was at the center of your life. Maybe it wasn't a person, but you've experienced heartbreak by losing the career you love, or it's your lack of health or strength that has you discouraged. If you've ever experienced grieve, despair...if you ever questioned whether life was still worth living anymore... you are in good company with these discouraged women visiting Jesus' tomb.

Do you know the Bible says that God is close to the brokenhearted and crushed in spirit? Some people think Christianity is just for people who are happy all the time, nothing gets them down, always thinking positively, no worries. But did you know that Isaiah 53 prophesies that Jesus would be a v.3 "man of sorrows, acquainted with grief". Jesus knew what it was like to have a heavy heart. **Jesus welcomes the discouraged.** In Matthew 11:28 Jesus invites with open arms everyone who is burdened and weary and discouraged into a rest-filled relationship with him. If you are here today and you say, "That's me, that's my circumstances, that's my life." You belong here! You are in good company, not only with God's people but with Jesus himself.

Jesus not only welcomes you. **Jesus is the only one who offers real hope for the discouraged.** These same women in despair at the tomb, at the end of Luke 24, says they were filled with joy. How is that possible? Other -ism and -ology comes down to tips and tricks for a better you, wishful thinking. And these things- whether they come in the form of a pill or a book or a mindfulness technique- may have some temporary relief, but they cannot cure the discouraged heart, can't provide a real hope for despair. But **Christianity grounds its hope in an historical event: the resurrection.** This is why Jesus in John 14 tells his disciples- don't be discouraged, while you will have hardships in this life, I have overcome the world! What was he talking about? This wasn't wishful thinking...he literally meant it. His resurrection from the dead was proof that every promise that God has made to us- to give us a hope and a future, to never leave us or forsake us, to give us abundant life, to forgive us for our sin, to heal us, to give us eternal life forever with him...every promise is true! And because of this, we can experience soul-deep joy, even in our hardship.

The Doubting

You may be here today and say, "Well I respect Jesus as a revolutionary standing up against the powers of his day- that's honorable, and I appreciate many of the things he stood for- mercy, justice, truth, grace, standing up against the man. I find his love and sacrifice inspiring... but I can't believe the primitive, mystical idea that he rose from the dead. Back then people believed these kinds of things, but I'm a modern person- I don't believe in miracles like this." But here's the mistake we make, we think that it was easy for these ancient Jewish people to believe. It wasn't. It was just as unthinkable and impossible to believe in their day as it was for us today.

Notice that after the women witness the empty tomb, and the visiting angels who tell them Jesus was risen and alive, just like he said he would do, they come back and tell the other followers of Jesus. **11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them**

like nonsense... another translation says, it sounded like a “fairy tale.” A fantasy. “Your crazy, your delusional!” One of Jesus’ followers was even given a nickname because of this- Doubting Thomas...who said, that until he put his fingers in the holes of Jesus’ hands where the nails pierced him, until he put his hand in Jesus’ side, where they speared him to make sure he was dead...he refused to believe. But they all doubted, they all disbelieved- he’s probably meets people in heaven and they are like- your Doubting Thomas! And he rolls his eyes...so was James and John...do they get a nickname for eternity like mine, “No!”

Here’s the point: **Nobody believed in the actual, literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus... until it happened!** Scholar N.T. Wright explains at length in his landmark book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* that Jewish people in the 1st century did not believe a man could be God (which was blasphemy and earned the death penalty) and would have never believed it was possible for an individual in the middle of history to bodily rise from the dead. And yet, somehow these women, along with the disciples and thousands and thousands of Jews suddenly began believing both of these things were true. How is that? Because hundreds of witnesses of the risen Jesus began telling everyone what they saw with compelling evidence and Christianity exploded! Many of these witnesses were killed because of their testimony, and went to their death never recanting what they saw and believed. **N.T. Wright: “no other explanations have been offered in 2000 years of skepticism that can satisfactorily account for how the tomb came to be empty, how the disciples came to see Jesus, and how their lives and worldviews were transformed.”¹**

But while these early Christians came to believe based on the overwhelming experience and evidence, they all started at the same place- disbelief, skepticism, and doubt...Do you know that **Jesus welcomes the doubting?** Some of you might come from religious backgrounds where it wasn’t OK to have hard questions. Where you weren’t allowed to have doubts and uncertainty. Personally, I’m skeptical of any religious group who can’t handle skepticism and questions. God welcomes your questions. He’s not intimidated. And so do we! The Bible says, if we seek God, we will find Him! In fact, we have a place for you to ask your questions and seek more information about God, faith and Christianity that we are offering starting next week called Christianity 101, which I will come back to in just a few minutes.

The Dropouts

It’s interesting that Luke names only one of the disciples here in verse 12, he says **Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb.** Out of all the disciples huddling together in the upper room that Sunday, he would have been the last one we expect to hear from. Do you remember what Peter did just a couple days earlier? He publicly denied Jesus 3x. He cursed Jesus and disavowed any allegiance to him. And he didn’t even do it behind Jesus’ back, Jesus watched it happen from his courtroom window. Can you imagine, you are standing trial for something you are totally innocent of, and one of your best friends who was with you the whole time and can testify for you, refuses to defend you? In fact, imagine if he stood before the judge and said, “Your honor, I don’t even know this man, and flipped you the bird!” Imagine the hurt you’d feel.

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, p.81-84

The abandonment and betrayal. This is Peter. After everything went down like this, he went from following Jesus back to his old occupation fishing. A coward, a disappointment, a failure, a dropout.

Can you relate to Peter? Maybe you feel like a failure and a disappointment. You look at your past and see a failed marriage, or you deal with the regrets from your parenting, or maybe a battle with addiction. You feel like you've blown it. Or maybe you've been made to feel like a failure and letdown by others. Maybe you are a church dropout, a faith dropout like me. I grew up in church but I dropped out of faith in high school and wanted to live my own life. Wherever you are, you may feel like Peter- like you've blown it, you are too far gone for God to love you, or accept you. And you look around and assume all these other people couldn't possibly be like you, and do the things that you've done.

Friends, I have good news- **Jesus welcomes the dropouts**. Do you know why I know that? This same Peter who disavowed and cursed Jesus to his face, who dropped out and went back to fishing, is the same Peter that the resurrected Jesus came looking for on the shores of Galilee. Not to judge him, but to love him, forgive him, accept him, and restore him. This is the same Peter whom God used to share the good news with thousands of people who came to faith in the Gospel and start the church that continues to this day. If Jesus is for dropouts like Peter, he's for you and me too. I've experienced his love for me, and his forgiveness and acceptance of me and he has changed me from the inside out and used me in ways I could not have imagined. And he will do it for you if you let him.

See, the resurrection of Jesus on that first Easter morning means there is **[Title Slide] hope for the rest of us**. Hope for those of us who are discouraged Jesus offers real joy, grounded in the reality of his resurrection and fulfilled promises. For those of us who are doubting, Jesus offers us to seek answers in His Word and the historical evidence, and to seek him who gives us faith to believe. For those who are dropouts, who feel like failures, or we have messed up too much for God to love and accept us, Jesus offers full forgiveness, acceptance, and restoration.

Two invitations for you today:

1- Explore Jesus Maybe you say, "Pastor, this all sounds great, in fact maybe even too good to be true. I kind of feel a little like those disciples, this sounds like a fairy tale." But what if it's true? What if the disciples who thought the same thing and then came to believe it and in fact give their lives for this Easter story are right? What if this message of the gospel that has gone out across the globe to every continent where we gather this morning with people in the most remote tribe in Indonesia and the most affluent metropolitan areas of cities like NY and London, this message that has transformed so many people around the world is true? You owe it to yourself to explore the claims of Christianity. Text "Explore" to 302-217-6594

Why Easter? Free Book for you at the guest center in the lobby.

Christianity 101- Free class starting next Sunday.

But you don't have to wait, for some of you- God has already opened your heart and has been drawing you and you are ready. Maybe something clicked for you that never quite clicked

before. **2- Trust Jesus:** Romans 10:9 *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* Text: "Trust" 302-217-6594 Pray.

Next Step: Grab the book **"Why Easter?"**
Christianity 101.