

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

The Marvelous Message of Easter | Text: 1 Peter 1:3

I am so happy to be with you today and to have the privilege of reflecting with you on the marvelous message of Easter. I know that Easter is marvelous if you are either a candy-loving kid or a brunch-munching adult. My wife would tell you that I fall into both of those categories! But as good as that part of Easter is, this holiday we're celebrating is, wonderfully, so much more than that.

If I had to boil down the real message of Easter to just three words, it would be these: **HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL**. Easter tells us that you and I have a source of genuine HOPE in this life. For those who put their trust in Christ, this hope SPRINGS up no matter how many times it gets beaten down. And the reason is because our hope is not rooted in wishful thinking or shifting emotions or present circumstances. Our hope is rooted in an ETERNAL God. As one of the eye-witnesses to the original Easter puts it: **In his great mercy God has given us new birth into a living HOPE through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3)**

I want to unpack that idea for us in just a moment, but let me underline the obvious: We could all use MORE HOPE today. These last few years have been hard. If you've been trying to parent and educate kids, or lead a team, or run an enterprise, or connect with loved ones under pandemic conditions, you've been stretched. If you're a kid, I doubt you've loved wearing masks or going to Zoom School! All of us have lived through one of the most contentious eras of social and political strife in American history. We've been dealing with tough economic conditions at home and a scary geopolitical situation overseas. This takes a toll on us all.

Last month, I attended an event where Dr. Richard Beck, a professor of psychology at Fuller Seminary and Abilene Christian University helped me understand the depth of that toll. In the past 20 years, Beck said, we've seen a precipitous increase in what mental health pro's refer to as "*deaths of despair*." Mortalities related to opioid abuse, depression, anxiety or loneliness have increased by between 25-300%, depending on the condition.¹ In 2020 alone, the rate of alcohol-related fatalities went up 25% and among young adults by 40%.²

Even where people, thankfully, aren't at the point of injuring themselves, so many these days live with hurts that are very hard. I can tell you that, as pastors, we're connecting weekly with a noticeably higher number of people struggling with bodily ailments, relational problems, financial pressures, or a sense of being lost or forgotten. We meet a sense of worry and fatigue that feels different, more intense and sustained, than earlier eras. I heard Vincent Bacote, a professor of theology and ethics at Wheaton College, recently call this reality, "**HOPE-sickness.**"

It's a serious problem when there is a deficit of HOPE in the life of an individual, family, organization or society. It has been widely documented that people with strong feelings of hope are generally physically healthier, emotionally more resilient, and more likely to exert a

positive influence on the spheres they enter. So, the question we should all be asking is how do we bring or build more hope in people's lives?

Let's imagine for a moment that all we had to rely on for an answer to that question was what social science could tell us. We're not going to stop there, but let's just suppose we asked a bunch of psychologists what they know about the Recipe for Hope. Again, I'll credit Dr. Richard Beck for this but, apparently, according to extensive research, psychologists have found that once someone's basic material and safety needs are met – there are **THREE KEY INGREDIENTS** people need to live with hope.

First of all, to live with HOPE, people need an experience of **MATTERING**. What that means is that they need to know that they are truly seen... that their aspirations, pains and peculiarities are somehow taken seriously... that they are welcome, known and loved. An experience of mattering comes from being embedded in some kind of loving relationship or nurturing community. Which explains, I suppose, why babies who aren't touched don't thrive... and kids in inattentive families or hostile neighborhoods tend to become very hopeless... or maybe even why there's been so much emotion in the past couple of years over "whose lives matter."

Alongside mattering, researchers found that to live with HOPE, people also need a sense of **PURPOSE**. They need places and roles where they can use their gifts to make a difference. *"Here, Mommy, I made this for you... or I'm interrupting, because I want you to hear my insight on this... or I'm coming to the party, but just let me bring the dessert."* It's like people are hard-wired for significance. They are made for meaningful work. Which is why it is not kindness to just serve our kids desires without asking them to contribute to the work of the family. It's why we don't do anyone favors by creating social systems that disincentivize work. When people aren't doing something that supplies a sense of purpose, they get depressed and dry up. They grow hopeless.

Finally, research demonstrates that to live with hope requires that one trusts that there is some **COHERENCE** to life. In other words, people need to have reason to believe that the confusing or devastating chapter they may be going through right now is somehow connected to a larger story that makes sense. Human beings can live with a remarkable amount of chaos if they're somewhat confident that greater order is coming or possible. But if every plan is always being disrupted and the goalposts are always moving and life seems utterly random or off-the-rails, it's hard to be hopeful.

Can you see why these last several years have increased our HOPE-sickness? When you can't be with people in the usual way... when the rhythms of school, work and life are topsy turvy... when authorities keep changing the story and we don't see where so many things are going... our sense of mattering, purpose, and coherence takes a big hit.

EASTER began in a place like that. The first Easter came to people during a pandemic of Hope-Sickness. Israel had been marched over by more armies than Ukraine. In fact, at the time Jesus came, it was occupied by foreign soldiers. Slavery and poverty were pervasive. Tax collectors were merciless. Divisions between classes were big. Disease was rampant and

healthcare horrible. Very few people had good internet. Like zero. Just seeing if you're still with me!

But, in spite of all that, a movement of HOPE was springing up. Why? The answer is explained by that verse. It was because of Jesus. Before Easter, plenty of people were attracted to Jesus. His character, his actions, his words were exceptional. But after **the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead** on Easter, an even larger group pivoted toward him. It became clear to them that Jesus was not just an extremely good person, not just a brilliant teacher, not just a superior spiritual guide or social visionary. Jesus truly was ALL those things because His resurrection proved he was an ETERNAL being, with a power greater than sin and death. If Jesus fascinated people before Easter, now he filled them. Those who received him were born into a **living hope** that eventually transformed the Roman Empire and spread out across history until it created this church whose mission it is to offer HIS hope to YOU and me.

Have you ever wondered, "DO I really **MATTER**? I don't have a Wikipedia page or a million followers... I've got a so-so history... I'm awfully young or very old... I'm just going to school or raising kids or doing my job or finding my way along. Do I really matter?" If Jesus were standing here in front of you, the way he appeared to Mary and the other disciples at that first Easter, I imagine him saying this: Why do you suppose I left the glories of heaven to come to this earth? Why do you figure I died on a cross to pay for your sins? Why do you think I brought you to this moment? The answer is: ***You matter to me.***"

On Spring Break recently, a family in our church went to Disneyland in California and were fortunate to developed a fast friendship with an employee there. Alberto shared that he had a sister (I'll call her Maria) who'd been brain-injured in a car accident in which both their parents had died. Left as his sisters' sole caregiver, Alberto, took the Disney job because he could get his sister a daily pass that allowed her to enjoy the park while he worked. Most of the staff at Disneyland came to know of Maria and her story and she became special to them. When Alberto asks Maria: "How was your day?" she sometimes replies, "I spent the day alone." Alberto says smiling: "Oh, no you didn't. There are a lot of people who care about you and are watching over you."

Christ Church isn't Disneyland or a perfect community. But we do pray to have eyes and a heart for people like Jesus does. YOU and your loved ones matter to us and not just us. When you become a follower of Jesus you start mattering to an eternal family, a great cloud of witnesses, a host of angelic beings who watch over you as you make your journey through this life. So never worry again about mattering. You do.

I pray you also realize that the risen Lord Jesus has a glorious **PURPOSE** for your life. After Easter, Christ's disciples remembered and wrote down the compelling calling he had given to all his followers. Christ had said, in effect, here's the job description I have for you – the role I want my family in every generation to play: "Bear witness to me to the ends of the earth. Be like salt or light in every environment you enter. Love people, in the radical way I've loved you. Invite everyone you can into the circle of God's life and teach them all the good things I've taught you." As the Apostle Paul went on to say: "For you are all members of the

Body of Christ, and each one of you has been shaped to play a special part in it.”

Few things in life build a spirit of hope in any of us as being part of a movement that truly extends hope to others. To that end, Christ Church is looking to LIFT 10,000 people in these next few years toward their God-given potential. We’re trying to raise kids with great character and relationship skills. We’re working to strengthen the marriage and parenting skills of adults. We’re seeking to care for people at the pain-points of life. In this next year, the people of Christ Church will invest almost a million-and-a-half dollars and many volunteer hours with 75 partners who are extending the hope of Jesus around the corner and around the world. Together we’re striving to multiply disciples, lift women and children, relieve suffering, transform communities, and develop leaders. My question this Easter is: Do you want to build an even deeper sense of purpose about your life? Would you like to know beyond a doubt that you’re making a life-changing difference in this world? Then come back and join us in Christ’s mission.

Let me say in conclusion, I imagine a lot of us wish there was more **COHERENCE** to our lives these days. Things do seem so chaotic and out-of-control. I talked recently with a friend who’s experienced a cascade of calamities in her health and family life that make it hard to see how any of this could be used for good. To the extent that any of us are feeling something of that, my main encouragement is to **remember Easter**. From the vantage point of the chapter Mary Magdalene and the other disciples were living that morning, it was clear that sin and evil wins over good, and death triumphs over life. They had NO HOPE. There was only weeping. And then the page turned and Jesus stood there. Not a shattered, greying corpse but a bright, breathing, talking, loving conqueror with a body that could never be injured again.

Beloved, Easter is God’s encouragement, when our stories have gotten very sad, to keep reading. It is the Great Author’s hint that there is an infinitely more hopeful narrative unfolding than we can see from where we are right now. Easter is God’s foreshadowing of a coming day when, as the Book of Revelation declares: **There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away** and not just another chapter but a fresh book will start because Christ will have made **everything new! (Rev 21:4-5)**.

In the meantime, you and I will live through our share of dark Fridays and silent Saturdays as the first disciples did. Thankfully, they’ll be punctuated by some surprising Sundays too. But in the end sin and evil do not win; the goodness of God does. Death does not get the final word; life does. Despair doesn’t triumph; laughter does. Christian hope is not based on wishful thinking or shifting emotions or present circumstances. **You and I have hope for life because our Hope is living**. His name is Jesus. He’s the most intelligent, loving and powerful being in the Universe. Remarkably, you and I matter to Him. He’s got a wonderful purpose for our gifts. There is coherence to our stories because they are part of His.

Believe this good news: Hope Springs Eternal. For Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

¹ Richard Beck, Professor at Abilene Christian University & Fuller Theological Seminary, Address at the [Center for Pastor Theologians](#), March 9, 2022.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/health/alcohol-deaths-covid.html?referrer=masthead>