

Easter People

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Date: 12 April 2020

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Praise to you, Lord Christ. Well, it is a joy to be together as much as we can be together for this Easter. I've been very much looking forward to this time and this day in particular, and all week I've been thinking about this quote.

It's a quote from a long time ago. It's attributed to St. Augustine, and it goes like this, We are the Easter people, and hallelujah is our song.

And I've been thinking about that because I believe that what the world most needs right now, and what we need, is for Christians all around the world to remember who we are and why we're here. And the answer to those questions is in this quote, We are the Easter people. Now I know that might be a strange phrase to some of you. What does it mean to be Easter people? I think the distinguishing characteristic of Easter people is our hope, because it's a hope unlike any other hope you will find in the world.

And that's why I want to look together at our first reading, 1 Peter 1, verses 3-5. Peter wrote this letter originally to prepare Christians for suffering.

[1 : 16] They were facing suffering, and Peter wanted to equip them to face it faithfully. And he originally intended this to go to people who were facing persecution, that form of suffering.

But of course it applies equally well to many different kinds of suffering, including what we're facing right now, this global pandemic, where there are people all around the world who are sick or dying. There are people who are facing financial catastrophe and ruin. There are people who are looking at plans that they had laid in their lives, crumble and fall apart.

And there's an enormous amount of fear and uncertainty. And so that is very much a kind of suffering that this would apply to. And what is so fascinating about this letter is that the very first thing Peter does after greeting these people, the very first thing he says is he reminds them what Easter means.

And he reminds them about the hope that they have because of Easter. And so that's why we're looking. And so our question this morning is, what is Easter hope and what makes it so valuable and so utterly unique?

[2 : 26] So let's pray and then we'll open God's Word together. Lord, we thank you on this Easter morning that you overcame death and that you rose. And it is because of that that we can open your Word with confidence, knowing that we're not alone, nor are we merely dependent on words on a page, but rather we're here to interact with and to hear from a living God through a living Word.

And so it's in that hope that we open your Word now. We pray that you would speak to us, Lord, wherever we are this morning. And we pray this for our good and your glory in your Son's name. Amen. So what is Easter hope and what makes it utterly unique?

There are at least three things in this passage that show us what it is and why it's so unique. The first thing that we see is this. Easter hope is not wishing.

It's waiting. It's not about wishing. It's about waiting. And I say that because I think most people, when you say the word hope, they equate hope with a kind of wishful thinking.

As though when I'm hoping for something, I'm crossing my fingers and I'm wishing as hard as I can that it would happen. And then maybe it will happen. But I have no way of knowing. And so I'm just going to wish for it as hard as possible.

[3 : 44] And if you think about hope that way, then maybe you think that some people are just inherently more hopeful than other people because they're more optimistic. And so hope can be thought of as a kind of personality trait.

But Easter hope is something altogether different. Peter says this in this passage. He says that because of the resurrection, Christians have been born again to an inheritance that is imperishable,

undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

And the key word there is the word inheritance. Because an inheritance is not something that you wish for. An inheritance is not something that you cross your fingers and you hope might one day happen.

An inheritance, by definition, is already yours. It's already yours. You just haven't received it yet. It's a promise that will be fulfilled in the future.

But it's already yours. You just have to wait. And that's what God says about people who put their faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible says that God adopts people who put their faith in Jesus.

[4 : 52] He makes them, He makes you, His child. He writes you into the will, so to speak. You receive the promise of an inheritance.

And that promise is secure. And it's just a matter of time before you receive what is already yours. That's the way the Bible talks about it. And you say, well, how can I trust God to keep His promise? And that's the thing about God. God always keeps His promises. If you were to take a rock and to drop that rock off a cliff, you wouldn't wish and hope that that rock would fall in the way that we normally think of the word.

You would simply know that the rock was going to fall because of gravity, because gravity is a constant. Well, God is also a constant. And in fact, God is more of a constant even than gravity. And so when God makes a promise, He keeps it because He is God. And so the resurrection, and the way the early apostles saw the resurrection, the resurrection was seen as proof.

[5 : 56] If God can keep a promise like this, then certainly that means God can keep all of His other promises to people like us. And so the first thing we see about Easter people is this, that Easter people are not wishing hard that things might turn out okay.

Easter people, no matter what we face in the present, we are waiting. We are waiting for a future that we know is secure. We are waiting for an inheritance that we know is ours.

And we know that all of this is hard and as overwhelming as it might seem. All of this will one day pass. And God will fulfill His promise. So that's the first thing.

It's about waiting, not wishing. The second thing that we see that makes Easter hope so utterly unique is that Easter hope is not a feeling. It's a fact.

It's not a feeling. It's a fact. I think this is very important because I know from talking to some of you that many of us feel hopeless right now.

[7 : 01] You feel completely overwhelmed. Every day the news brings more tragedy into our lives, makes us more aware of the suffering. And it can be very, very overwhelming to try to make sense of and process all of that.

Not to mention whatever we're all facing in our own lives right now. And if you're a Christian and you read passages like this about hope, I think it can be very easy, if you're anything like me, it can be very easy to read this as a command.

If you're a Christian, if you're really a Christian, you must feel hopeful. And if you don't feel hopeful, that says something about your faithfulness. It says something about your level of commitment. And so the sense of needing to have hope or wanting to force ourselves or will ourselves to feel hope, that that can be, I think, the way we respond to some of these passages.

And so I want you to listen to me very carefully. If you're thinking that way, you need to hear this. It is okay if you don't feel hopeful. It's okay.

Do you think that any of the people that Peter was writing to felt hopeful? I can almost guarantee you that none of these people felt hope. What they probably felt was exhaustion and despair and terror.

[8 : 15] They probably felt many of the things that we're feeling right now. And the thing is, that's the whole point. Easter hope is not a feeling. It's a fact. Peter says that God has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And by definition, a living hope is a hope that is alive, which means it exists independently of our feelings. It is a hope that exists independently of our feelings.

So what that means is you can feel hopeless and simultaneously have Easter hope. Because Easter hope is a living, breathing reality.

He is with you and for you and in you, even now as I say these words. And those things are true regardless of how you feel.

That's what makes Easter hope so unique. So we're going to feel all kinds of things over the next few weeks and months and years. We're going to feel all kinds of things.

[9 : 22] And that's okay. Here's the thing that I want you to think about, and this might even be worth writing down and spending some more time thinking about later this week. How you feel does not change who God is.

How you feel does not change who God is. And so Easter people are not governed by our feelings. We give ourselves permission.

We allow ourselves to feel whatever we need to feel. We know that as human beings, we're going to feel all kinds of things. And some of those feelings are going to seem rational and some of them are going to seem very irrational.

We allow ourselves to feel all of these things, but we don't allow those feelings to govern us. We don't allow those feelings to determine our outlook. We base our outlook, we base our perspective on a hope that is outside of our feelings, that doesn't depend on our feelings, on a hope that is living and breathing and with us all the time.

Easter hope is a man who went into a tomb and came out again. And that's what makes it different. So here are two things that make Easter hope unique.

[10 : 35] It's about waiting, not about wishing. It's a fact. It's not just a feeling. And the third thing that we see here is that Easter hope is not just a coping strategy.

It's a call to action. Now, by that, I mean the point of Easter hope is not simply to help us get through the day. Now, there's nothing wrong with that.

And we all need help getting through the day. I'm not saying that's not important. But Easter hope is much more than that. Easter hope is actually a call to action. You know, most Christians, I know, think that things like justice and ending poverty and protecting the environment, that those are important things.

But what's interesting is, most non-Christians I know think the same things. They care about justice. They care about the poor. They care about protecting the environment. And yet what's interesting about the non-Christians I know who care about these things is that if you were to ask them, many of them don't really believe in God or they don't believe in a kind of God who would care about the world that we live in.

Many of them believe that this world is just an accident of physics and biology. Many of them believe that we're here not only as an accident, but that we're only here for a finite amount of time and that sooner or later, all of this is either going to burn up or it's going to freeze solid.

[11 : 57] And I always think it's interesting. Why would you care about justice? Why would you care about poverty? Why would you care about the environment? If all of this is just a great cosmic accident and one day it's either going to burn up or freeze solid.

And what's interesting is as we look at the debate around how to handle coronavirus, there are many out there arguing that the best response to coronavirus is not to socially distance ourselves, but the opposite.

It's to expose as many people as possible as quickly as possible to the virus. And the argument goes that if we do that, we can more quickly develop a herd immunity.

And this is frankly how we as human beings have survived in a pre-technological world for thousands of years with lots of viruses that are trying to kill us. The only problem with this theory is if you don't have a vaccine, this approach is going to mean that many more people have to die.

And so the question is, if all of this is just an accident and the only point of life is really the propagation of the species, then why would that matter so much? Why would that present such an ethical dilemma?

[13 : 04] And the problem with all of that is this. To paraphrase the scholar N.T. Wright, the message of Easter is that this world matters, that life matters.

Even though this world is full of suffering and death, what Easter means is that God is not going to continue tolerating suffering and death. That in fact, God is going to do something about it.

That in fact, God has done something about it. Because at the resurrection of Easter, things were set in motion that cannot be undone. At the resurrection of Easter, God loosed an arrow of redemption that even now is arcing through history toward its mark.

And its mark is nothing less than the renewal of all things. That's the point of salvation history. A resurrected Jesus means a resurrected world.

It's just a matter of time. This pandemic is not about God teaching us a lesson, as some people have said. It is evidence that the world is broken.

[14:13] It is evidence that when human beings thought we could live in a world that God made, while ignoring that God and cutting ourselves off from Him, we thought that that was a good strategy and we're now realizing that that was a terrible mistake.

So it is evidence that the world is broken. But Easter means that we have the kind of God who not only weeps with us and laments our suffering with us, who not only suffers for us to bring an end to all suffering, but we have the kind of God who is actually able to do something to one day put the world right.

And Easter is a preview of that. And so Easter people are called to work alongside God. This is why it's a call to action. We're called to work alongside God with all the spiritual power that He gives us to bring the hope and the victory of Easter to every corner of this world, to the most hopeless people and places.

And so this is why we fight injustice as Christians, because we believe that Easter shows us that one day there will be no injustice, that justice will reign.

We care for the sick because Easter means that one day sickness will be no more. We care for this world because Easter means that this world is meant to last into eternity, that it matters.

[15:42] So Easter people are people who do all we can to bring the hope of Easter to every corner of the world. Because we know that the resurrection of Christ is not just about life after death, it's just as much about life before death.

In other words, this life. It's a promise of abundant life and hope and healing and victory and love that we are invited into.

Because we know that the resurrection of Christ happened, because we know what it means, we are called to go out into the world to alleviate suffering and to bring hope wherever we can, because every time we do that, we are announcing the victory of the resurrection to the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

So what does all of this mean for us here and now on this Easter in 2020? Well, all of the projections and all of the models continue to change. And some of the numbers are looking a little more hopeful than they were even a week ago.

But that doesn't change the fact that there is a lot of suffering in the world right now. A lot of people in our community are suffering and struggling as a result of this whole pandemic, and that could last for years.

[17:01] And you and I cannot take all of the suffering in the world on ourselves. We can't do it. It will crush us. And some of you, if you're reading the news and if you're taking in all of these stories, you know it sort of desensitizes you.

It begins to shut your heart down because you can't handle it. And that's because you're a human being and you're finite. The only one who can do that is Jesus Christ. But what we can do is to be Easter people wherever God has planted us.

We can be Easter people. We can be people who are bringing the hope of Easter in a Good Friday world because that's what we are. We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world.

It feels like Good Friday right now. It feels like a time of death and mourning and hopelessness. And we're called to be Easter people in the midst of all of that, which means, as we've already said, that we can have and proclaim a hope that is not just wishful thinking, but it's waiting for something that is certain.

We can have a kind of hope that is not just a feeling. It's not just sentimentality. It's a fact that exists outside of us. And we can have a kind of hope that's not just a coping strategy to get us through the day, but it's a call to action.

[18:16] It's a call to do all we can to love and serve the neighbors right around us, the people whom God has placed in our lives to bring hope to the hopeless. You know, one of my mentors, Doc Wilson, said earlier this week when we were talking, he said that they were praying as a church.

He's a pastor. And that a woman, an older woman in the prayer group said this. She said, it is our privilege to be here right now. She said, God chose to put us in this time and place for such a time as this.

So it is our privilege and our glory and our honor that God chose to put us here for this crisis. And that has so inspired me. You're not here by accident.

I'm not here by accident. God chose to put us here for this time and this place for the sake of the people right around you who desperately need hope. So that is who we are and that is why we're here.

And my prayer is that Christians all around the world on this day are awakened to, reminded of, that truth. That we are the Easter people of the world.

[19 : 24] And hallelujah is our song. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your resurrection and we thank you for the hope that it gives us this unique Easter.

hope. And I pray that this hope would define our outlook, that it would inspire us, that it would fill us this day.

And I pray that your spirit would now take these truths that we have spoken from your word and plant them deep in our hearts, Lord. Plant them so that they could begin to sprout and put down roots and grow outward and fill us and flow out of us into the lives of people around us, Lord.

And I, in particular, pray for those people who are suffering and feel hopeless right now. Lord, that you would comfort them with your presence in ways that only you can. We pray this in your son's holy name.

Amen. Now let's sing together.