

Resurrecting Hope: If You Had Been Here

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[0 : 00] Good morning and welcome here for this Sunday, April 23rd. Time keeps on slipping, slipping, slipping into the future, as the song says. Maybe you know it, maybe you don't.

So whether you're a regular attender here with us this morning, whether you're someone who is visiting or happens to just find this message online, I pray that God moves in your heart in a wonderful and powerful way.

We're continuing our current sermon series called Resurrecting Hope. And through this series, we've been recognizing that life's greatest challenges can only be faced when we have the hope that only comes through the power and presence of Jesus.

And that power and presence at work specifically within us. And by, through, our faith and trust in him. In the first week of this series, we walked with Mary Magdalene as she came to the tomb on that Easter morning.

She was met with the surprise of meeting Jesus, seeing him face to face, alive and well. And his resurrection, we recognize, filled her with hope again for the future.

[1 : 16] Last week, we discovered there were others who saw him as well. His love restored hope even after they had failed Jesus in his greatest time of need.

And today we find that our resurrected hope, this resurrected hope that we find, can meet us in the midst of sorrow and grief. And our sermon is titled, If You Had Been Here.

So it's been nearly 24 years now. I was reflecting on that this week. Since she passed. But when Michelle and I met, my mom was in the midst of a fierce battle with cancer.

Fierce. Family and friends had covered her with prayer and asked God to heal her for so long. And despite how things seemed, many of us believed in our hearts that God would come through.

God would show up. God would heal her and take that cancer away. Restore her health. But that's not ultimately how things played out. I'll never forget that cold winter night when a few of us gathered around her bedside in the hospital.

[2 : 31] We've often joked about the Royal Alexandra Hospital being the Dixon Processing Facility. Many of us have been born there. Many of us have passed there.

But we gathered that night knowing full well that we were nearing the end. And I left her bedside that night to go home. Just in time for Michelle to receive a call from my dad saying, time to come back.

So all of my family, including me, have wrestled with a range of emotions in the years since. I was thinking about it as I was preparing this sermon.

And it's still pretty raw. 24 years is a long time. Whenever I need a reminder of how long it's been, Emily was born shortly before my mom passed away.

So she is a visual representation of the time that's passed. So as I say, we've all wrestled with different emotions. Some of us processed it well and have been able to heal and grow and learn.

[3 : 39] Others are still struggling with it after all these years. And sometimes we've felt deep grief and heartbreak. Sometimes we've felt confused by how this happened.

How this played out the way that it did. And honestly, friends, sometimes we have felt anger. I know, not me personally, but others have felt anger that God would allow this to happen.

Maybe you can relate to that type of reaction at times in your life. But as time has gone on, though, the most shocking thing has been that the majority of us, in our own way, have really felt a deep sense of comfort.

Beyond explanation, we've largely felt that we have grieved as we've grieved. We've not grieved alone. I believe that without question, God grieved and it grieves with us.

And his comfort is what got us through. What got us through some very dark and difficult times and still does. I've said to people before that without question, there is a...

[4 : 48] My dad's name was Herb. My mom's name was Grace. There are grace and herb-shaped holes in my life that cannot be filled because of who they are, who they were, who they still are, and I hope to see them again.

I have that assurance that I will see them again and we'll catch up. And they'll tell me all the things that I messed up on. Ha ha! Oh, we were watching and we just kind of went, oh, don't do...

Oh, never mind. He'll learn. So the Gospels are full of stories of Jesus' interactions with people.

That's one of the greatest things about the ministry of Jesus Christ, is that it represented people.

It was about people. It was about interaction. And there was a light to me in his ministry that shone on his love and his compassion for other people.

One of the most powerful resurrection moments we learn about in Scripture, and there are more than one. There is more than one resurrection in Scripture. actually takes place before Jesus' own resurrection.

[5 : 54] And it's this encounter with Jesus that we see the way he meets people in the midst of their grief and their sorrow. So let's hear about it. You can grab a Bible in front of you or if you have yours with you.

You can turn to John 11, and we'll be hovering in John 11 this morning, so put your finger in there if you like. We'll be beginning at verses 1 to 7, and I'll read it for us.

And you probably know the story that's about to come. Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sister sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick. When he heard this, Jesus said, this sickness will not end in death.

No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

[7 : 03] So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, this is the confusing part. He stayed where he was two more days. And then he said to his disciples, let us go back to Judea.

I don't know if you've ever been confused by that. We're going to look at it a bit this morning. But if you've ever heard, that night when my dad said, time to come back, I ran right back.

I turned, got right back in my car, went right back. I knew it was time. I knew we were running out of time. So we're introduced to this family in John 11 that includes Mary, Martha, and a man named Lazarus.

And this family is heartbroken that the brother Lazarus is gravely ill. And it becomes clear that Jesus apparently has a history and a connection with his family.

He spent time with Mary and Martha in their home. Remember the differing perspectives in Mary's and Martha's attitudes that Jesus drew attention to. And Lazarus is described in Scripture as a person Jesus loves.

[8 : 13] Mary and Martha, as we just read, send word to Jesus to come quickly because they had hopes that he would heal their brother. And surprisingly, as I just noted, when Jesus gets word of Lazarus' condition, he decides not to rush back but to remain where he is for two more days rather than coming to what Mary and Martha would perceive to be his aid.

In some ways, to me at least, this feels like the equivalent of a 911 call. But the response seems to be intentionally delayed. Why?

Does that strike you as odd, you know, as I reflected? Maybe it has. Why would Jesus not have come as soon as he heard their call for help?

Didn't he care? Well, Jesus answers the question in the text. He makes it clear that his delay is intentional. His delay will somehow, Jesus indicates, bring glory to God.

Jesus sees the bigger picture. Every one of us can recall a situation where we found ourselves where we needed Jesus to show up.

[9 : 31] Right? Have you ever cried out to Jesus and said, Lord, I need you. Every hour, I need you, we sing. So maybe it's a diagnosis or a sickness that we need healing from.

Maybe it's a broken relationship that we feel only Jesus can restore. Neighbors two doors down from us. I don't think I've shared this story but I won't use names.

I grieved the other day because I go for a long walk some days and I came home and saw a little sandwich board sign with a realtor's information on it.

And these people were getting to know, were starting to become friends with, were talking about faith and stuff. And so I stood on their front sidewalk and caught the wife's attention in their front window and I just did this.

Made a sad face. So we had a conversation. Their relationship is over. They are going their separate ways after being together since they were 18 years old.

[10:41] A relationship needs to be restored, right? there's an example. Can Jesus restore that relationship? Will he? I'm praying he will. It may not be the plan.

So maybe it's a dream that we've had for our family, our career, our marriage. Maybe we desperately wanted Jesus to show up. You've heard my story before about Jesus closing doors firmly and without question that I desperately wanted him to open.

So like Mary and Martha, sometimes we find ourselves in need of God to show up, but maybe we feel at the time and the moment that he's nowhere in sight.

The truth is that our timing, it's rarely God's timing. Rarely. And I bet you there's 100% agreement of that statement in here this morning.

That you can share examples where you wanted something to happen. You begged God for it to happen, but it didn't happen. Maybe it happened later. Or maybe it didn't happen at all.

[11:51] And in this story it seems that Jesus, in his all-knowing wisdom, is strategic in his response. Because Jesus sees the bigger picture here.

He sees a way to make a kingdom difference in these circumstances. And he does this by staying where he is for two more days.

I believe that in every prayer we pray, Jesus does answer. God does answer. Sometimes that answer is yes.

And that plays out. Sometimes the answer is no. Sometimes the answer may be not yet.

Have you ever heard that answer and thought, rats, Lord, that's not what I wanted to hear. Or perhaps the answer is wait. Are you waiting right now for Jesus to answer?

[12:49] Are you waiting for Jesus to show up? It's an old statement, an old quote, but perhaps you've heard it before. Sometimes the one giving the test is the most quiet when the test is in progress.

Do you understand what I'm saying there? So sometimes when we don't hear from God, it's because we are where he wants us to be. I'm going to use a Michelle story and I won't get in trouble for this one.

She works as a school librarian. She has been enthusiastically trying to get a job with the Edmonton public library system. She has had interviews.

She has applied on every opening that comes. God keeps saying, no. In fact, God said it so clearly a couple months ago, I guess, someone at the school that she works at came up to her and said, we are so lucky to have you here.

We're so blessed. We're so, you're so, such an important part of our team. And she told me that when she came home and I said, sounds like God's speaking through someone else, doesn't it?

[14:03] Usually, she's the one who says that to me. But we had a moment to reflect, right, and say, this is God saying, no, you are where I want you to be, stop it.

Right? He does that to us sometimes. And I believe that in some ways, trying to make sense of our lives can be like trying to imagine a full painting from just a single brush stroke.

For creative types, we get that, and I'll give you some more ideas here. Extrapolating a complex musical composition from one note. I don't think we could pick a Beethoven, figure out a Beethoven composition from one note.

Trying to put a puzzle together without the box cover to direct us. There's some groans. I have to confess I'm not a puzzler per se.

Doesn't give me joy, doesn't fill my bucket, but many people that I dearly love find great joy in that pursuit. My brother and I, my oldest brother and I, once put together a movie poster sized puzzle from a Star Wars movie, and the entire image is essentially sand.

[15:21] Oh my, do you ever get appreciative of shapes and box covers and your thin grasp on sanity? But we did it! So I've seen pieces with so, puzzles with so many pieces, such similar colorization, such a similar image like that, that it would seem impossible to sit down and place

each piece in the correct place without the guide, right?

Even for skilled puzzlers that I know, they recognize that particularly when working on a large puzzle or a complicated one, you have to have the cover to guide you.

I have to confess that I've been tempted to hide the box at times, just to give people a sense of control. But you see that, the sense of needing to see the bigger picture, right?

In a literal way. Sometimes we need the bigger picture to try and find context. And I believe that each one of our lives is like the single piece of a massive puzzle.

Without question, our lives fit somewhere. Maybe you know where your life fits. Maybe you're still learning like I am. Our lives do fit somewhere into the overall story that God is at work in, is creating in the world.

[16:51] world. But we're really limited in seeing the bigger picture, at least for now. I've said to people before, I get the sense that when we get to heaven, we're going to have at least some sense of the bigger picture.

I'm also satisfied with the fact that God may just go, eh, I just did it that way. But I think we will get a sense of what was at work, what happened, how things fit, the grand story that God is telling.

So when trials come, difficulties arise, it can be so heartbreaking. We all recognize that, we've all experienced it, because we simply can't see how all of this can fit.

And certainly how tragedies and grief and struggle can be part of a beautiful picture in the end. And at the moment, our circumstances, if they're tough, can feel more like a shattered image or a broken image than part of a beautiful picture that will come one day.

In lots of ways, our family still doesn't understand why my mom's life ended the way it did. Certainly not in the way that we would have pictured it to be, certainly in the way we would have liked it to see.

[18:13] We miss her. I miss her a great deal. But we found peace in the fact that God has and will continue to use my mom's life and her legacy, her example and her deep, powerful witness for Jesus Christ to bring him glory, even now that she is gone.

Friends, Jesus sees the bigger picture. And one day, as I said, on the other side of eternity, I believe in some way, we may come to see it more clearly too.

When Jesus finally arrives at the tomb, we learn where Lazarus has been buried, Lazarus has already been dead for four days. And Mary and Martha are distraught over their brother's passing. John 11, beginning at 17, going to 32. So if you still have your finger in there, John 11, 17. on his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

[19:32] Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask.

Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die.

And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she replied. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside.

[20:33] The teacher is here, she said, and is asking for you. When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the one place where, at the place, sorry, where Martha had met him.

When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house comforting her noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Many had gathered to come and support the family as they mourned Lazarus' passing. We do this all the time, right? We gather to support friends and family family when loved ones pass.

And Martha meets Jesus as he arrives, but in her grief we read, Mary stays in the house. She just can't do it. This portion of the passage reveals such raw emotion to me.

[21 : 44] And it also seems to give us a blueprint for how we are to respond to the losses that we experience in our lives as well. In both verse 21 and verse 32, Mary and Martha, separately respectively, each say a phrase that I'm sure we can relate to today.

And it's the title of our sermon. Out of sadness and a broken heart, Mary and Martha tell Jesus, if you had been here, her brother would not have died.

If you had been here. The beauty of the Bible is that it's always so honest about the complicated relationship between creation and creator.

The relationship between humans and God, as we can see in scripture, as we can all attest to in our own lives, it's rarely clean and tidy.

Throughout the book of Psalms, and Vern shared a selection from Psalms, we see some of the most emotional writing and poetry ever written by humanity.

[22 : 56] I love poetry, and maybe you do as well, but there's no question that within the book of Psalms, there is some of the most powerful writing ever written by humanity.

And some of this writing reflects a joyful heart. Sometimes it reflects hearts that are broken, or grieving, or even angry at God.

And this seems to be where Mary and Martha find themselves, in this perspective of, if only you had been here. My friends, I want to remind you of something important.

Jesus is not afraid of your feelings. Hear me say that? Jesus is not afraid of your feelings.

He really isn't. Mary and Martha are hurt. They are angry. They are confused, and they are in anguish.

[24 : 01] They'd hope that Jesus would drop everything, that he would come and turn things around, that he would fix this. And now they find themselves without hope.

What I love about this story is that Jesus doesn't reprimand the sisters. He doesn't say, well, you clearly don't have a lot of faith, because you didn't trust that I'm, okay, I'm coming, so just wait. He doesn't get frustrated. He's not offended. He doesn't say, do you trust me or not? Because really, this is bad behavior, right? He doesn't say that. He's not offended and annoyed or disgusted or irritated or anything, because he's not afraid of their emotion.

Instead, his response is to comfort them. He reminds them that for those who place their faith and hope and trust in Christ, death is not the end.

He's not the end. He's there to bring comfort. He reminds them, foreshadowing the miracle of Easter that is yet to come, that he is the resurrection and the life.

[25 : 20] Jesus responds with comfort as Mary and Martha lay this raw pain before him. Friends, don't be afraid to express to God how you're hurting.

Allow yourself to be vulnerable before him. We recognize through Scripture, lots of people complain to God. Lots of people are angry with God, threaten him, try to control him, try to hold out on him. But you know what? God has, we see over and over in Scripture, God has thick skin. Jesus knows what it's like to suffer. In fact, author Max Lucada once said, permit yourself tears.

God understands. I think too often we come before God or we come to church. I was reflecting this in the sanctuary by myself this morning.

Do we come to church feeling like we've got to have it all together? Yep, I think so. Do we come to church feeling like we don't want anyone to see the stains that we're carrying around with us?

[26 : 36] Yeah, I think so. But you know what? This is a place of grace. This is a place of forgiveness and a place of love because we stand under that cross.

And I believe that when we begin to live with this kind of honesty, this kind of vulnerability and trust and love for one another, I believe that's when we can truly experience resurrected hope.

because we begin to discover that the loss that we've experienced in our lives is not the end. The Bible tells us so clearly that God will use everything in our lives, the good, the bad, and the ugly, Western reference for you, for His glory.

He will use it all, everything, for our ultimate good and for His glory and His purposes. That's it. So talk to God about how you feel.

Let Him have it and I promise you He will not turn away. In fact, what I think that you'll find as you let your tears flow and as your heart breaks and as you're honest with Him, you'll recognize that you really aren't alone.

[27 : 59] Let's hear the words of John 11, 33-35 and I've shared with you before I loved part of this passage because it includes the shortest verse of the Bible and as a child the easiest to remember

and memorize.

John 11, 33-35 When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come along with her were also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

Where have you laid Him? He asked. Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus wept. Jesus is moved to His core as He recognizes the profound grief around Him.

The profound grief of these people that He loves and He cares about. And He asks where Lazarus has been buried. Then in verse 35 we read the shortest verse in all of the Scriptures.

You can look. There isn't one shorter. The Bible simply says that Jesus wept. He cried. He grieved. He mourned with them.

[29 : 08] Through His divinity Jesus knew that He was going to resurrect Lazarus. He knew that. But in His humanity Jesus is moved to tears.

I believe that someone, perhaps even several someones need to hear that this morning. When you weep, Jesus weeps with you.

When you hurt, Jesus hurts with you. When your heart breaks over loss and struggle and pain, His heart breaks too.

scriptures tell us in the beautiful poetry of the book of Psalms that God is close to the broken hearted and He binds up all their wounds.

Though we live in a world where sickness is a reality, disappointment is all too common and relationships can be truly painful. We have a God who is not sitting back watching, entertained by our pain.

[30 : 19] We have a God who enters into our pain with us to bring healing. Let's hear the words of John 11, 38 to 44.

I've been sidetracking too much. Almost done. Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

Take away the stone, He said. But Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, by this time there is a bad odor for he has been there four days.

Then Jesus said, Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. When he said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

[31 : 29] The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, Take off the grave clothes and let him go.

Jesus comes to the tomb and tells the people there to remove the stone that was blocking the entrance of the tomb. And oddly enough, in only a few chapters, another stone would be rolled away to reveal an empty tomb.

when Jesus himself was resurrected. His victory over sin is what allows us to hope that he can come into our lives as well.

It allows us to recognize that Jesus is victorious over sin and death in his own circumstances, although Jesus never sinned. Don't hear me say that wrong.

Oops. but in our lives as well. Jesus can forgive sin because he was the man without sin. Jesus is our hope in our resurrection and restored, resurrected hope in our lives because he was victorious over death.

[32 : 44] And so with faith, we can see the glory of God through miracles that are only possible through the power and presence of Jesus. Jesus. Friends, Jesus brings dead things to life.

This kind of story seems to be the theme of Jesus' life and his ministry. We get a sense throughout the Gospels that Jesus came and he still comes to bring new life to everything and to everyone.

Resurrected relationships, resurrected purpose, resurrected hope. Jesus can do anything that God might receive the glory.

So this morning, I want to invite you to see, maybe for the first time, that though your heart may be hurting, you are not alone.

Jesus weeps with you. Though the puzzle pieces that life may have given you may not make sense, you can trust that God knows, God is the creator of the bigger picture, and that this story, your story, is not over yet.

[34 : 13] Let's pray. Lord, we recognize and admit that we don't always understand, often rarely understand, everything that you are doing.

We confess to you that at times that lack of understanding, lack of perspective, can cause us to question, cause us to be angry, at times even cause us to begin to lose faith or hope in you. Father, help us to grow to trust and believe that you alone have the best of intentions for our lives. Increase our faith, Lord, and help us to learn to trust you more and more as we experience the various trials and frustrations that life may bring.

We ask for a powerful sense of your presence and your comfort with each one of us, and particularly for those who are struggling in their own grief or in the difficult circumstances of their lives in these days.

We ask all these things in the precious and powerful name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our risen Savior and Lord. Amen.