Hope on our journey - encountering the resurrected Christ!

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Preacher: John Winter

[0:00] As we were singing that last hymn, I was thinking about something I read this week of Christian believers in Syria facing the challenges they do being Christians in the predominantly Muslim society.

! And particularly a society where there's a very militant form of Islam which requires you to convert very often or die and certainly at least to be severely disadvantaged.
And I read one Christian believer explaining how a family member lost their life for refusing to deny the name of Jesus.
He said that he would rather die than deny the name of Jesus. And so he did.
In a violent, cruel way, he was beheaded for holding on to his living hope. And this is what I want us to see this morning, that the resurrection of Jesus is not merely a historical claim of Christianity.
[1:14] It is a life and death matter. It is our living hope. And if it is our living hope, we will be prepared to die for it if needed.

And thank God we don't live in a country where we have to die for our faith. But there are many Christians in the world who will have to. Or at least face that prospect.
And this is where it really matters. See, at Easter in the Orthodox countries, when you announce Christ is risen, you get a reply. The reply is, He is risen indeed.
You know it. But when it's a life or death thing, when your life is on the line and somebody says to you, is Christ risen? To announce He is risen indeed may be the signing of your death sentence.
But it is a living hope. And the sermon this morning is all about that living hope here on Easter Sunday. We're going to read together from Luke chapter 24, verses 13 to 35.
[2:16] So this is after the death of Jesus and just after the resurrection. But news is filtering out.

But the news is not clear. The messaging is confused. Some people among the crowd, particularly some of the women, are claiming that the tomb is empty.
But they don't know what's happened to the body of the Lord. And then Peter and John had been to the tomb. Peter saw that it was empty but didn't go in.
John went in and saw the bandages and we're told he believed. We're not exactly sure what he believed. But he believed that something special had happened. But in general, the New Testament is very clear that the people who arrived at the tomb and heard the news first of the empty tomb thought that his body had been stolen away.
They did not think he was risen from the dead. And the two people that we're going to read about now are in that position. They've heard the rumors, but they're not persuaded.
[3:27] So let's read together. It's on the screen. You might not be able to see that. Sorry. But if you can, follow along. Now the same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them. But they were kept from recognizing him.
He asked them, what are you discussing together as you walk along? They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them named Cleopas asked him, are you only a visitor to Jerusalem?
And do you not know the things that have happened there in these days? What things he asked?
About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all of the people.

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The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.
[4:36] In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early in the morning, but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive.

Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it, just as the women had said, but him they did not see. He said to them, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.
Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he was going to go further. But they urged him strongly, stay with us, for it is nearly evening. The day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, give thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them.
Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?
[5:49] They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven and those with them, assembled together, and saying, it is true, the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.

Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. Amen. And the Lord will bless to us the reading of his word.
So you imagine visiting the grave of a loved one, expecting to further attend to the body of the deceased, and discovering instead an open grave and a stone rolled away.
What would you have thought had happened? Almost certainly you would have thought, someone has taken the body away. And that's exactly what the women thought.
Someone has taken the body away. It was an inevitable reaction. She was not, they were not, expecting a resurrection. I've mentioned John and Peter.
[6:52] They got there. Again, it's not clear what John believed, but he was beginning to puzzle, put it together, perhaps reflecting on some of the sayings of Jesus about having to die but then rise again.

And maybe it began to dawn on him, but Peter didn't seem to have a clue. And we know that Mary Magdalene went back or stayed on at the tomb, and while she stayed there at the tomb, she saw two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been, and they began to say, why are you crying?
And she says, sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will get him. She wasn't expecting the resurrection. Then she hears a voice behind her, Mary.
She recognizes that voice, and she turns around and says, in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. And she grasps hold of him to hug him to herself, and he says, don't hold on to me now. Go and tell my brothers that I'm alive, and tell them to meet me in Galilee. And then she goes, and so the rumors circulate.
[8:07] Some of the disciples want to believe it. Some of them have trouble believing it, especially the famous Thomas. Doubting Thomas, we call him. That's a little unfair, isn't it?

I bet he wasn't the only one doubting. But that name stuck with him. Because these two men on the Emmaus Road equally doubted. All of the language, all of the conversation they were having on the Emmaus Road was one of, he was, we had hoped, all past tense.
They thought he was dead. And it's important for us to see that the claim of the resurrection is a claim that can be critically evaluated.
It is a historical event. It is claimed to be a real, literal resurrection. And that is what we believe in this church.
It is a well-documented fact. We don't have time to go into it. Over 500 independent witnesses saw it. The evidence of the New Testament is compelling, so much so that a queen's council, back in the days of Victoria, said it was incontrovertible and would pass any test in a court of law.

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[9:27] But it is a miracle. It is an absolute miracle. The miracle that we're experiencing here of the resurrection was not something expected.

It is not something that one would say was normal. It's not a mere resuscitation, you know. We thought he was dead, but he came back to life again. They were absolutely certain that he was dead.
In fact, the New Testament says that the Roman soldiers, who were expert in execution, they pierced his side, and out of his side flowed water and blood.
And that phenomenon suggests that his heart had ruptured. So he was dead. Really dead. Not only so, he was bound in linen cloths, death cloths, and his body had been anointed with very heavy oils and slices that had gathered around his body and hardened.
Even if he had resuscitated for him so weakened to get up and push a stone away, that itself would be quite miraculous. And of course, this is not, as some people would sneer and say, well, these were people, superstitious people, you know.
[10:43] They knew what dead people looked like, and they did not generally expect that anybody would rise from the dead. This is a miracle. It is critically evaluated and critically examined.

It is a faith that can be rationally believed, not just an experience or a feeling, a metaphor, if you like. But it's more than that.
It is something that must be experienced in the heart. And that's why this story is so important. Because these disciples, though the resurrection had literally happened, were not satisfied with the rumors.
And they certainly weren't going to force themselves to believe it. They were skeptical, to say the least. In order for them to be convinced that Jesus was alive, they would have to experience the risen Christ in their own hearts and lives, in their own experience.
And this is why this event is so important. Because faith is not just an intellectual assent to teaching in Scripture.
[11:55] Faith is the combination of what we believe in our heads with what we know to be true in our hearts. It is a, both an instruction of the Word of God and an application of the Word of God by the Holy Spirit of God to our hearts.

It involves a new birth, a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing, a new experience that becomes convincing and you will stake your life on it.
I would rather die than deny Jesus. That becomes real. It becomes living. It's not just based on facts.
And this is why this story is so instructional. These people at least believed in Jesus and they certainly believed in His message, but they were disappointed for they thought that He was dead. But had He not told them that in believing in Him they would have eternal life? Had He not told them that if they believed that He was the way, the truth, and the life, they would go to the Father's house?
[13:03] Had He not told them those things? Yes, He told them. But information alone is not enough. Information alone does not transform the heart.

That becomes a work of the Spirit by which we are born again into God's family. This becomes real and living in our lives and in our hearts.
And that's why Paul writes into the Ephesians and says, I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints and His incomparably great power for us who believe.
That power, he says, is like the working of His mighty strength which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at the right hand in the heavenly realms.
That power that makes you believe, that power that transforms you, that turns information into something that you will stake your life on is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.
[14:09] It is absolutely transformative. It is new life, new birth. Have you come across a person who wasn't a Christian and then became a Christian?

And didn't you notice the change in their life? Didn't you notice that they became different people? That almost the old side of them, the old person, it's gone and they've got something new, something that's convincing, something that's changing their lives for the better.
That's what the resurrection means. The resurrection of Jesus guarantees the resurrection of all believers. We have eternal life and it isn't just something in the future.

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It is something that happens the moment we believe. It becomes transformative from the inside out. We are born again. We live again. We have a new life in us. And it's making all of the difference to our life and experience every day.
And this is the point I want to emphasize, you see. People say, well, you know, I go to church at Christmas and Easter. I like to celebrate the birth of Jesus and the death of Jesus. I've done my bit.
[15:21] Well, you've done your bit, certainly, in recognizing the historical truth. And that's good. And we're glad you're here. But this is not something for Easter and Christmas. This is something for every day.

This is something that is meant to make a difference to our everyday lives. And so let us notice, first of all, the disappointment, the disciples' disappointment as they're on their journey.
We're told that Cleopas and his friend are quite miserable, really. They're walking along and literally, Luke says, they're tossing about ideas, throwing back and forward ideas.
Ideas, undoubtedly, that they'd learn from Jesus and about Jesus. How did they square what they saw on what we now call Good Friday with what they were taught about Jesus?
We had hoped, they said. We had thought that he would rise from the dead, but, well, what now?
And so they're disappointed and they're full of anguish and full of perplexity.
[16:33] Their faces are downcast. And then, in what is a wonderful literary irony, and there's some great paradox here, a stranger turns up and gets involved in a conversation with them.

What are you talking about? Well, have you not heard? Everybody knows. It's like going to Newcastle after the Carabao Cup and asking if anybody had heard that they'd won a cup.
It's impossible to miss. And so here it is. You've got to get football in sometime, haven't you? Here it is, talking to Jesus.
Have you not heard about this Jesus? A prophet, a great teacher from God, the Messiah we'd hoped, and, well, our chief priests and the teachers of the law, they put him to death, and we just don't know what to think anymore.
And Jesus lets them talk. He lets them get it out of their system. The irony of it all, they're telling Jesus their problems.
[17:46] He's inviting them to do that. And they're also asking him if he understands. Yeah, I kind of get it. You know, you're going to discover that I get it really well. But at the moment, I'm going to play along with you.

There, did you notice, kept from seeing who he was. Their eyes are blinded, perhaps by their grief, but it's almost like a deliberate concealing going on.
Let them talk it through. All of their doubts, all of their fears, all of their anxieties, all of their troubles. Let them get it out of their system. Let's find out what they really hope in.
Oh yes, they had an idea of Messiah, an economic Messiah, a military Messiah, just like all of the Jews had, one who would conquer the Romans, but they had no concept of Messiah who would die at the hands of the Romans, or needed to be raised from the dead.
They didn't have that kind of idea at all. And so they share the events of the day, but they have no divine perspective.
[18:50] Their perspective is entirely human. And as a result, they've got no hope because that's what happens when people die if you don't believe in Jesus.

What hope do you have? If you don't have an idea that there is life after death, if you don't have a certainty that when a person dies, they go to be with the Lord, which is far better, then death is the great leveler, isn't it?
All of your dreams, all of your hopes are lost. It's just the same for these men. What hope do we now have in the face of death? Their hearts and minds dominated by confusion and despair.
Now, I want to ask you a question. Who is Clopas? Or Cleopas? Who is he? Do you know? Have you ever come across him before in the Gospels?
You don't know. He is, as Amy Hunter said, he is a nobody. I think I might have this quote, do I? He is a nobody. He is just a name in history.
[19:57] Oh, no, it's not that one. Sorry. He could be one of us who have ever heard of us. It doesn't really matter, does it?

What matters is, here is somebody who is not particularly important, not one of the leading disciples and his companion. Here they are, they're walking along and they're troubled, they've got this anguish and they're disappointed and disillusioned and Jesus draws alongside them to reassure

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them.
They're on their life's journey and it's not going well. And I wonder if you're a bit like Cleopas today or his companion.
Maybe on your life journey, things are not going well. Maybe life has delivered some hard knocks to you, some disappointment, some disillusionment. Perhaps you're thinking, nothing really encourages me anymore.
I'm not sure that I have much of a reason for living. Perhaps you're thinking, well, I had all my dreams and hopes invested in that person or in this thing or in this idea of my career and my future.
[21:03] It hasn't worked out and everything's going wrong around me and, well, there's no hope. I want you to see the living Jesus Christ coming alongside people like you, walking with you on your own life journey, seeking to reassure you and help you at this time of your discouragement.

He is tenderhearted. He listens. He pays attention. He walks with us on our life's journey and He says, trust me, especially when it's going wrong.
Trust me. I will not pass you by. There's a lovely event in the Gospels when Jesus sends the disciples out. He's had a long day of ministry.
He says, I want you to go back to the other side and they get in a boat and they go across Galilee and as they go across, it gets dark and stormy and it's dreadful and they're afraid and then they think, we're going to die here and then they look out in their anguish and their despair, they look out and they see a distant, ghostly-like figure walking across the water and they realize it's Jesus and so they cry out to Him, Jesus, come and help us, come and save us and then, amazingly, Mark says, He made as if He would have passed them by.
Why would He do that? He sent them out there and they got into trouble. It was His fault. He shouldn't have sent them out and then, when they were in trouble, He made it look like He wasn't interested.
[22:40] He was going to pass them by and they had to cry out, Jesus, come and save us and He got into the boat and said, Why did you doubt? Oh, you of little fear. But isn't life like that for us?

Sometimes we cry out to God in our time of anguish and need and we think, He's not interested. When I called upon Him, He wasn't there. So why tell us that story?
There's a man in Whitby today who, well, I'm not sure he thinks about it very much now, but I bet you if I reminded him, he would be very grateful for that story because that man used to come into church on a regular basis and was determined to resist.
And I was preaching that particular day on that passage and I quoted a hymn which is coming up now.
Pass me not, O gentle Savior, hear my humble cry. While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by. And I warned from the pulpit that day that you may be taking a risk with your soul because you're resisting crying out to Jesus for help and this might be the very last time He'll pass by your boat.
[24:11] This may be the very last time He calls out to you and so you need to call out to Him. That man worked away.

He went away that day to work which was his general behavior at that time and then he rang up his wife late the afternoon and said, I want you to pray for me.
Something happened this morning. And he was converted and I baptized him. I'll never forget that passage because of that man.
in his hour of need he cried out come into my boat. Lord, I'm in trouble. Save me. And when he cried out Jesus came in.
That's the lesson he wants us to learn you see. When we're walking the long life road and when things are difficult when we're feeling disillusioned and hurt and everything else when we're in that position if we cry out to Jesus He'll come into our lives.
[25:10] But we mustn't let him pass by. Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry while on others thou art calling do not pass me by.

Is that your heart's cry? Would you rather die than be without Jesus? Please don't pass me by. The next thing I want us to see is that the disciples discover Jesus through Scripture.
They're troubled and they're perplexed and then this man they think is a stranger he says to them oh you're foolish. And then he begins to explain to them the Scriptures from Genesis 2 Malachi the Old Testament he tells them all that the Scriptures had to say regarding himself.

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Perhaps he went through the prophets like Isaiah and said did you ever read Isaiah 53 the suffering servant? He was pierced for our transgression he was crushed for our iniquities the chastisement that was upon him upon us was given to him and by his wounds we are healed.
That's about me. Did you read that it said my righteous servant will justify many he will see the suffering of his soul and be satisfied that's about me.
[26:31] Did you never read that? And he began to unveil to them the Scriptures and so they get a really great Bible study but they still don't get it all until they go into the house and when they get into the house then they hear and see something quite amazing.

Jesus begins to break bread and then they recognize him. What do you think they saw? What did they see?
Perhaps the nail prints. Perhaps it was the words this is my body which is broken for you. Perhaps it was the remembrance of how he took bread and broke it and fed 5,000 people.
There was something in the action of his breaking of bread that made their hearts warm up. They said did not our hearts burn within us?
And they saw him. They saw him. And then everything changed. We broke bread didn't we?
[27:50] This is my body broken for you. Imagine if that was Jesus and you see the nail prints. This was for you. He was wounded for my transgressions.

He was crushed for my iniquities. This is for you. My blood shed so that your sins could be cleansed and atoned for.
The scripture and the experience of breaking bread that communal experience and the work of the Holy Spirit behind the scene made it all come alive.
It was their Eureka movement and everything was different from then on again. I want to ask you if you've ever had that moment.
Have you ever had that Eureka moment when you're now not just basing your faith upon words that you hear or are read in the Bible and not just in the taking of bread and wine but you're experiencing the living real presence of Jesus in your heart.
[29:08] That your heart burns within you whenever you think of Jesus. This is why Easter matters. This is why this resurrection story matters.

Not just a historical event but something that changes us from the inside out. So does it matter?
Let me share to you a quote as we close from C.S. Lewis. You'll have to push on a bit on this one.
C.S. Lewis, you might know him from the Narnia stories.
C.S. Lewis once said, Christianity if false is of no importance and if true of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.
Why not? Because your never dying soul depends on whether this is true or not. So let me introduce you to a philosophical concept in closing.
[30:12] I used to teach philosophy so bear with me. Blaise Pascal, a brilliant mathematician and biologist introduced a concept called Pascal's wager.

In modern terms that means his bet, his gamble. He says you've got two choices when it comes to the gospel.
you can choose to believe it or not believe it but you're gambling your soul on it. He said you'd be foolish not to gamble on it because if you accept Christ and accept the gospel it will change your life.
It will at least give you a moral purpose in life. It will at least teach you to be kind to other people. It will at least tell you to be generous to the poor. It will at least tell you to be considerate of people who are less fortunate than yourself and be kind to your children and nice to your husband or wife. It will give you a sense of having something to live for which is greater than in yourself. If you choose not to believe it, you will be free from some of its restraints.
[31:28] You can do what you like with your life. You can get drunk. You can take drugs. You can do this and that. Or you can do all of that thing. But you'll probably kill yourself in the process. But you'll be free from restraint, of course.

You can live your own life and have fun. But you know what having fun is like? You can have so much fun and then it stops being fun. So you need to do something that's a little more outlandish to make it fun again.
And you eventually realize that that's a fool's game. So what's the best thing to choose, says Pascal? It's at least, at least, just for the sense of purpose in life, best to follow Jesus.

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But if it proves true, then it's essential. Because if you gamble against it and it's true, you go to hell. And you lose your soul. And that's a risk, that's a bet, too, too great to take. What shall it profit a man, says Jesus, if he gain the whole world but lose his soul?
[32:42] What can a man give in exchange for his soul? And so today, I ask you, I implore you to move from just believing that Jesus is a historical detail, or the resurrection is a historical detail, to recognizing that this is a life or death matter for you, being able to say, Christ is risen, and I know he is risen because he lives in my heart, is essential for your eternal well-being.

And so I invite you today to invite Jesus into your heart and life, to be your Savior, that this may become a living hope in you. Let us pray.
Okay.

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