New Hope Sermon power of the gospel The Ministry of His Presence

[**Easter is the Joyful Catastrophe**](https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/april/easter-is-joyful-catastrophe.html)

“Do you know what the word *gospel* means? *Euangelion.* It means literally *the joy news*. J.R.R. Tolkien, says there’s a kind of story … that brings us unbelievable joy … He says these stories always have a certain kernel to them. There’s always some incredibly hopeless situation, and victory is snatched out of the jaws of defeat. But how? Always through someone who comes in, and whose weakness turns out to be strength, someone whose defeat turns out to be a victory. He says it’s those kinds of stories that just seem to bring us joy. He called them *eucatastrophes.*

Do you know what the word *eucatastrophe* means? The joyful catastrophe. The tragedy that turns out to be a triumph. The sacrifice that turns out to bring joy. He said, however, there’s a Eucatastrophe of the eucatastrophes. There is a Story in all of the stories. He believes there’s a bass string to the human heart, and this gospel Story is the only story that will pluck that string so the whole heart never stops reverberating and vibrating with joy. The reason it will reverberate is … this is *the* reality to which all of the other stories point. It happened. It really happened. There really *is* a hero who defeats the villain. There really is Jesus. The word *gospel* means the joy news. Joy. It’s real. You have to have it.” (Tim Keller sermon on the Joy of Jesus frm the fruit of the \spirit series – the character of Christ.) Have you experienced that in the Presence of Jesus? That’s why we sang In Thy Presence is Fullness of Joy at the beginning of the service.

Actually, Christ’s presence with His people is part of the paradigm-shattering truth of His resurrection. He gives His people the ability to shift from the paradigms of their culture- bound thinking to God’s level of thinking and action. Last week we looked at this in terms of how Jesus elevated the role of women to equality in service and leadership and brings reconciliation and peace to a fractured world. Actually, when Ruben Duniya returned to northern Nigeria two years ago, he went expressly to be that kind of paradigm-changing peace-maker between the muslims and Christians killing each other in the northern regions of his country. Jemima Williams returned to India to bring a new level of counseling to peoples in Madras city, Rebecca Babirye from Uganda has gone to Japan to teach in seminary and strengthen other women leaders in Japan, Hilary Mushambi is helping Dambudzo plant a new church in South Africa and working for issues of justice and reconciliation in that country, and Tuvsho has returned to Mongolia to develop Gen X + Y leaders who had been orphaned and were open to the training and equipping she will provide. All members demonstrating the power of the gospel in their contexts.

Now, for the next few weeks, I want to continue with the power of the gospel series by focusing on how Christ’s resurrection appearances demonstrate the power of the gospel. We start with the story from Luke 24 of the two Emmaus disciples after Christ’s crucifixion. The theme from this story is the Ministry of His Presence, a powerful message of hope that is very applicable in our own lives. As the song we just sang says, “in Christ alone our hope is found. He is our light, our strength and our song.” In the Emmaus story Jesus came alongside these despairing disciples and listened to their anguish and confusion. Then, he taught them directly from the Word and helped them understand the scripture in a new way. And finally, He revealed Himself to them through the breaking of bread in their home.

In each of these areas, it is **the ministry of His presence** that turned things around. This is the good news of the gospel for a hurting world today. It’s the story of grace as Anne Lamont defines it: “Grace means you're in a different universe from where you had been stuck, when you had absolutely no way to get there on your own.”*Anne Lamott, Plan B (Riverhead, 2006), pp. 54-55*

The disciples’ lament when Jesus joined them on the road to Emmaus was: “We had hoped” 

….We had hoped the Rabbi Jesus would redeem Israel but the chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death and they crucified him.”LK.24:20-21 Our hope died with Him.

The collapse of hope is so poignant in today’s world – because of devastating wars, oppression, illness, disaster, failed relationships, terrorist attacks like the one last Sunday in Sri Lanka. etc. This is critical because**,** as Pope Francis says, “Hope opens new horizons making us capable of dreaming what is not even imaginable.” God has hardwired hope into our brains. Neuroscientists argue it can be the difference between living a healthier life versus one trapped by despair. And research bears them out. Studies show hopeful college kids get higher GPA’s and are more likely to graduate. Hopeful athletes perform better on the field, cope better with injuries, and have greater mental adjustment when situations change. And in one [study](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/pressure-proof/201303/5-ways-hope-impacts-health-happiness) of the elderly, those who said they felt hopeless were more than twice as likely to die during the study follow-up period than those who were more hopeful. Hope is powerfully catalytic. It isn’t just an emotion but an [essential life tool](http://www.amazon.com/Making-Hope-Happen-Create-Yourself/dp/1451666225).

Jesus knew these Emmaus disciples, like his other followers, had their former hope in him as Messiah replaced by the cloak of despair when he died. In fact, their hope had suffered such a death blow that when these Emmaus disciples heard the women’s account of the resurrection, it seemed to them to be an idle tale. Even when other disciples went and witnessed the empty tomb and told them so, they didn’t believe. **Destroyed hope makes it impossible for us to believe miracles**….This is why so many millions don’t believe in God.

**The Difference Jesus’ Presence Makes**

BUT Jesus’ presence turned their despair around. For the Emmaus disciples it happened in three ways. First, his very presence and questions helped them articulate their grief. That’s important. One old hymn says: “I must tell Jesus all of my trials…I cannot bear these burdens alone…in my distress he kindly will help me; he ever loves and cares for his own. I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! I cannot bear my burdens alone; I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.” (words and music: Elisha Hoffman).

#1. Jesus listened as the Emmaus disciples voiced their despair. And that’s the gift of His presence that we need. Sometimes the Holy Spirit alone is the One who listens to our confusion, but most often God brings others with whom we share our trials. This is the role of the community – to listen, to empathize, to counsel, to help and demonstrate faith and hope on behalf of the suffering one.

But notice in the Emmaus story that Jesus did more than just listen. After they explained the reason for their distress, He first reprimanded them for their lack of faith but then #2. He taught them the scripture and proved to them that the Messiah had to suffer the things He had suffered. They said later that “their hearts burned within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us.” (Lk.24:32). That’s another ministry of His presence. Have you ever felt God speak His Word to you in that way? It comes with a deep inner certainty that He has spoken a word specifically to your heart. And finally, #3. Jesus appeared to them in the breaking of the bread. That’s when “*their eyes were open and they recognized Him*.” (V. 31)

I believe God still does that. In fact, at Communion time in this church I pray for that encounter with Jesus each week. Through the centuries since Jesus’s death and resurrection there have been countless stories of how Jesus’ presence, through the Holy Spirit, has restored His followers hope. Today I want to share from my experience how the Lord has done that for me this past month.

You’ve heard how He led me to the beautiful stained glass windows of Gary Memorial Church, but this is a story of what God has done each week since then as I have gone back with Marti to sit in His presence in the midst of that beauty. Each time He has met me and spoken His word through scripture and songs to strengthen my hope.

**Encounters with God that Have Strengthened My Hope In Him**

The first week I just cried out my distress like Hanny did centuries earlier in the temple when she was barren and ridiculed by Elkhanah’s other wife. That ridicule and shaming had gone on for years, as “*her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her*.” I Sam. 1:6). It became too much, so this one year when Hannah got to the temple, “*she wept bitterly and prayed to the Lord…out of her great anguish and grief”* I Sam. 1:10, 16). But Eli the high priest heard her and gave her the assurance that God would grant her what she had asked of Him. And so it was. That year, after years of barrenness, Hannah did conceive and bore her son Samuel – the great leader of Israel during his lifetime. God came alongside Hannah in her grief as He came alongside the Emmaus disciples and I knew He had heard me and come alongside me.

The second week as I stood in the Gary sanctuary the Lord brought to mind Ps. 84 and I began to read it outloud: “*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Heaven’s Armies.
2I long, yes, I faint with longing to enter the courts of the Lord. With my whole being, body and soul,
    I will shout joyfully to the living God. 5What joy for those whose strength comes from the Lord, who have set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. 6When they walk through the Valley of Weeping,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+84&version=NLT" \l "fen-NLT-15242b" \o "See footnote b)] it will become a place of refreshing springs.  7They will continue to grow stronger, and each of them will appear before God in Jerusalem.[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+84&version=NLT" \l "fen-NLT-15243c" \o "See footnote c)]10I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God than live the good life in the homes of the wicked.11For the Lord God is our sun and our shield. He gives us grace and glory. The Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right. 12O Lord of Heaven’s Armies, what joy for those who trust in you.*

The beauty of God’s house, the joy in His presence, the way He turns our weeping into places of refreshing springs, the renewed strength, grace and glory He gives as our sun and shield – all this spoke deeply to my heart as I went over that psalm line by line in that sanctuary. And I left strengthened. The problems would not go away but God would make a way to walk with me through them and turn them to blessing.

Week three – I was looking at the stained glass of Jesus as our Shepherd and the Gaither song came:

“Gentle Shepherd come and lead us, for we need You to help us find our way.

Gentle Shepherd, come and feed us, for we need Your strength from day to day.

There’s no other we can turn to who can help us face another day.

Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us for we need You to help us find our way.”

 (words and music: Bill and Gloria Gaither)

That song that week kept ringing through my mind as sang it quietly the whole time we were in that sanctuary.

It spoke to me the assurance of Jesus’ presence, His help for each day, His strength and His feeding of my soul which was pressed down with the wear and tear of Alzheimer’s care. Again, I left with renewed hope.

Week four - This time I was looking at the stained glass of Jesus as the light of the world and noting how the lantern He was carrying simply radiated a light despite the dark day around us. Immediately the song the Lord brought this time was:

“O soul are you weary and troubled? No light in the darkness you see?

There’s light for a look at the Savior and life more abundant and free!

Refrain: Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face,

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the Light of His glory and grace.

His word shall not fail you – He promised; believe Him and all will be well.

Then go to a world that is dying, His perfect salvation to tell!

Refrain: Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.

 (words and music: Helen Lemmel)

It is a dark time when we are weary and troubled. But it’s only in the darkness you can see the stars.

Hope is a ray of sunshine breaking through the clouds after the storm. Faith is knowing there are more where that one came from. All because of a resurrection perspective.

So (at this point in my story!) last Thursday the Easter hymn “Thine is the Glory” began singing in my mind as I sat with the Lord. The words “Thine is the glory, risen conquering Son” spoke to me. As did “make us more than conquerors through thy steadfast love.” That is what we all need when life’s problems press in on us. So again I went away encouraged and knew we needed to sing this song in the service today!

**Conclusion**

Do you see how God comes and listens to our laments, and then reassures us with His word in Scripture and in song of His care and provision and protection?

**The ministry of God’s presence is part of the power of the gospel, beloved. This is great good news that all people need to hear**. Jesus met the Emmaus disciples on the road and brought them from grief and confusion to hope and joy. That ministry of His Presence is the same today! Hallelujah! Amen.

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