

Happy Easter. Happy Resurrection Sunday. Happy day that changes everything. This past week I was reading about Google search frequencies, because how else would you spend your free time, and discovered that in 2020, searches for a certain word reached an all-time high: hope. Also at an all-time high were words like *prayer* and *panic attack*, while searches for *party* and *festival* hit an all-time low. *Puppy*, *barbecue*, *pubs*, and *hot tubs* also reached an all-time high, so if you contributed to those, congratulations. But this morning I want to talk about hope. How many of you could use some hope in your life? Our world is a divided mess, we wonder if this pandemic will ever end, the future seems so uncertain. We need hope. And that's what today is all about.

Now, when I say hope, I'm not talking about wishful thinking. I'm talking about hope that is "trustful expectation". It's based on the character, works, and promises of God. The expectation that we will experience the fullness of God's goodness both in the present and in the future. That's the hope the world is really looking for and, if you are a Christian, that is the hope that is anchored in what we celebrate today. The resurrection is either a cruel April Fool's joke, or it's true. If it's a joke, the joke is on us, and we have no hope. But if it's true, and it is, then that changes everything. **If the resurrection is true, circumstances don't dictate the hopefulness of our lives. Our risen Savior does.** The early church knew that, basing all their hope on the resurrection. We've been going through the book of Acts and have seen the centrality of the resurrection in all they believed, did, and proclaimed.

Acts 1:3 - ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Acts 2:24 - ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Acts 2:32 - ³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.

Acts 3:15 - ¹⁵ And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

Acts 4:10 - Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well.

Acts 5:30 - ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.

Acts 10:39-40 - ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear.

The early church woke up every day living in the glorious hope of this statement: "If Jesus is alive, then _____." Every circumstance, trial, relationship, mission, was defined by the hope of a resurrected Christ, and **we can live that way too.** I want to look at three foundational ways we can live with this expectant hope.

If Jesus is alive, we can pray boldly expecting God to move.

Acts 12:1-5, 7b-11 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days

of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church...⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him...And the chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” ⁹ And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. ¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”

This is a difficult time in the history of the church. Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled when Jesus was born, executes James, the apostle, and arrests Peter with the intent of putting him on trial and likely executing him. We've all been in times that seem this hopeless. So the church responds with the only recourse they have: Prayer. Prayer is the utterly dependent cry to God to intervene in hopeless situations, and the level at which we believe and hope in the resurrection directly determines the boldness of our prayer.

If the mission of Jesus ended with him dead and buried, that means God is not capable of much, so you wouldn't ask him for much. It would be like asking a cat to bark, a mammal to lay an egg, or a Philadelphia Eagles fan to be kind. They are just not capable. But if God raised Jesus from the dead, our hope says that same power is available and at work in our lives, so our prayers can ask for that potential. The hopeful church prays for God to intervene for Peter's sake, and he is set free. As the old Puritan preacher Thomas Watson said, “The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel.” I don't know the last time you used the word “fetch” in a sentence, but I'm inspired.

Now, this isn't name it and claim it. God isn't a heavenly order taker. Peter was spared, James wasn't. And there is coming a day Peter won't be spared. **God doesn't always answer our prayers in a way that we ask, but I often wonder if God wonders why we don't ask for more.** We see that in Jesus on the last night of his life. He asks the Father to take this cup from him, find a way other than the cross. That is a bold prayer! But Jesus also prays “Your will be done.” We too often look at that second part as a prayer caveat. We are all excited about the first part, then are relegated to the second, just in case God has other plans. But “Your will be done” is also a bold prayer of hope. “Lord, I am asking for this, but I trust you to move in the way that accomplishes your will, and I ask that I align my will with yours.” We are going through that right now at our house with a college search. We were praying for my oldest to get into a school that doesn't let many applicants in. We got the bad news this week. But we are praying just as boldly that God would use choice #2 to accomplish his purposes. This passage encourages us to pray boldly for God to move, and the empty tomb tells us to trust completely because God can use a crucified Messiah to accomplish his will. How bold are your prayers? God raised Jesus from the dead. Pray that he would give that same power to broken bodies, broken relationships, broken finances, broken hearts, and then trust in hope with however he responds.

If Jesus is alive, we can rest peacefully expecting God to draw near. Hope and peace go hand-in-hand because peace is a product of hope.

Acts 12:6-7a ⁶ Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.”

I left this out earlier because I wanted to highlight Peter. Look at how he responds in anticipation of his imminent trial and likely execution. He’s sleeping like a baby. Actually, he’s sleeping like a teenager. That word “struck” could also be translated “smote”. Peter was sleeping so soundly that the angel had to smite him to wake him up. Where does that kind of hope come from? Peter had an intimate relationship with Jesus during his ministry and witnessed and spent time with the resurrected Christ, confirming all Jesus said and did. Peter remembers Jesus saying, “I will be with you to the end of the age”, and he most assuredly is experiencing the peace-inducing presence of Jesus here. Peter also remembers when Jesus said **John 11:25** ²⁵ **Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”** Because Jesus lived, Peter knew the grave wasn’t the end for him. Read 1 Peter 1 this week and you’ll see the eternity Peter was holding onto here. He was a man sustained by his hope in the presence and promises of God, and peace was the result.

You ever been around someone totally at peace in the Lord? They’re so annoying! I talked with an old believer who had lived some tough years but was totally at peace. I asked him how, and he simply shrugged. It wasn’t a shrug of confusion; it was a shrug that meant “Of course it’s Jesus!”

What’s keeping you up at night? Our peace is robbed when we believe the circumstances of our life have power and the final say. **But if the grave didn’t have the final say for Jesus, our circumstances don’t have the final say for us.** I lay in bed worrying about church, my family, etc. and then think “Wait. What am I doing? Invite God into this.” Peace doesn’t ignore the difficulties of life but holds onto Jesus as he holds on to us. There is nothing in your life right now that God doesn’t know about, care about, want to be in the middle of, want to walk through with you or carry you through. And that includes taking you to himself when your time is up. Invite God in and let his peace reign.

If Jesus is alive, we can go confidently expecting God to prevail. If you are with Jesus, you can’t lose.

Acts 12:21-24 ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. ²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied.

If you don't believe Jesus is alive, you've got to find your hope elsewhere. That can be power, dominance, popularity, control, wealth. Herod chose to find it is the praise of man. He opposed God, he opposed the gospel, and he allowed himself to be worshipped. It didn't end well for him, and his opposition was removed.

Nothing will stop the spread of the gospel. I think of those ice-busting ships in the Arctic that just plow through and make a way. Persecution, legislation, lethargy, decreasing church membership may challenge it, slow it down, but God is an overcomer, and the gospel will prevail. Every time we baptize someone, we are reminded of that. Every time we hear from our international ministry partners how people are trusting in Christ even in the midst of terrible persecution, we are reminded that our God is unstoppable. **If God can overcome the grave, there is nothing that will stop him.** And because that's true, there is no greater cause, movement, mission you can invest your life in than the cause of the gospel. If you follow Jesus, you win.

If you are here this morning and you've never followed Jesus, I'm so glad you came, and I want to encourage you to take that step. This whole passage was during the time of Passover, the Jewish celebration of God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Additionally, it was during the time of Passover that Jesus died on a cross and rose again three days later to deliver all of us from bondage. What happened to Peter is a picture of what God can do for all of us. We are all sinners, offensive to a holy God, separated from him, and in bondage to sin and death. But Jesus paid for those sins on the cross and defeated sin and death when he rose again. His work has broken the bonds of sin and death, our chains have fallen off. His work opened the gate to freedom, to eternal life with God. And all we have to do is walk through. There's nothing you can do to earn it. You must simply accept it by faith as a gift. If you make that decision this morning or want to talk to someone about making that decision, come see me, go to our connecting center, grab the person sitting next to you. We want to walk with you as you step into the hope we celebrate today.

"He is not here but has risen." Those are seven of the most glorious words ever spoken because they are a declaration of hope. As we close, my prayer for all of us this week, this year, for the rest of our lives, is that we would hold fast to that hope by filtering all of your circumstances through "If Jesus is alive, then _____." because that hope changes everything. If Jesus is alive, the tomb is empty, and our hope can be full.

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. -Romans 15:13