

Easter 2023: What We Mean When We Say God Hope As a Name

Matthew 28

By Pastor David Fields

I. Hope Has a History

“So, the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid *yet filled with joy.*” – Matthew 28:8

These women see the empty tomb, hear the words of the heavenly messengers, and meet the resurrected Jesus. By why believe any of this?

1. Matthew, this male disciple, records that *women* were the first witnesses of the resurrected Jesus. Women were not trusted to bear witness in court at that time and place. If this was a ‘made up’ story, the writer would never have included women as the first witnesses.
2. The Christian claim that Jesus was alive could have easily been disproved by recovering and displaying the body – but no one does.
3. The women here, and then Jesus’ remaining eleven disciples, “worshiped him,” though some of disciples had their doubts, some reservations. And the early church, all Jewish people at first, how could it possibly have got off the ground? What could lead these Jewish people, to begin to worship Jesus? Only if they really saw him raised to life again.

“There are good and even superior reasons to claiming that the resurrection of Jesus was a historical event, and consequently the Lord himself is a living reality.” – Wolfhart Pannenberg

4. All these disciples faced intense persecution as they lived to tell this story. Most died *because* they doggedly maintained that they saw Jesus alive, and that all people need to turn in trust to Jesus. I wouldn’t give my life up, or willingly suffer like that to spread a message I knew wasn’t true. They wouldn’t either.

What could explain this historically? If you don’t rule out miracles out of the gate – the best, most plausible historical explanation is that Jesus really and truly was raised from the dead, and hundreds of people saw him alive.

How do we respond?

With Worship: The women, the disciples, they fall on their faces and worship him as God and King – even with some doubts still swirling in their minds. Then they stand up, with renewed vigor, and give their lives to follow him, love like him, and announce the news that Jesus is King and God.

“Imagine a friend tells you he has paid a bill for you. How should you respond? You have no idea until you know the size of the bill. Until you know how much he paid, you do not know whether to shake his hand or fall down and kiss his feet.” – Martin Lloyd-Jones

The reality is, Jesus has just taken hell for us. He experienced true and utter darkness for a time, so that we can live in God’s light and love forever. Let that reality fuel your response to him today.

With Trust: The resurrection of Jesus draws a line through history and says, “there is real hope for you.” Hope resting on history. But that line it draws calls us to step over it, and into life with Jesus at the centre.

II. Hope Has a Horizon

The arc of the whole story says the God who created this world in love, as we read on the very first page, is now, on this day, beginning a process of making “all things new” as we read on the very last page. The horizon is “New Creation.”

“Christianity says that when God comes back, he is going to renew and cleanse this earth. Bodies, loved ones, homes will be restored, purified, and beautified. It will be a life in which God’s people hug and eat and dance. Resurrection is the restoration of life. Jesus’ resurrection means resurrection for all those who believe in him into this new heaven and new earth.”

– Tim Keller

“Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?”

"A great Shadow has departed," said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land..." – J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

“Is *everything* sad going to come untrue?” The resurrection of Jesus is God’s final and definitive “yes!” On this day, “A great Shadow *has* departed.” Death has been dealt the deathblow.

And it’s this day – this real day in real history – this begins that process. And this horizon of hope means we have a real purpose – we are given a renewed task of bringing the message of hope and real healing and justice to the world.

God calls Moses to join him in his work to set the Israelites, God’s people, free from the bondage and oppression and slavery they face in Egypt. But Moses is afraid – afraid of the task, of Pharaoh, of what his own people will think. But he keeps assuring him:

“Don’t be afraid...Go...I will be with you.”

This same commission is repeated three times in our text:

1. The message comes from God, through the angels to the women: “Do not be afraid” (v.5) “Go...” (v.7).
2. Jesus meets the women, and after he greets them, and they worship, he says: “Do not be afraid. Go...” (v.10).
3. And to his apprehensive disciples on the mountain – and now, by extension, to us: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, [don’t be afraid, but] go...and make disciples of all nations...” (v.18-19).

How do we respond?

So don’t be afraid...but go...

- Do not be afraid of what your friends or co-workers will think of you.
- Do not be afraid that you will sound like a fool.
- Do not be afraid if you have your own set of questions about God, and don’t always feel that confident.
- Do not be afraid of what will happen if someone says they disagree.
- Do not be afraid that the Gospel calls you to live distinct from the pattern of the world.

And hear his promise again – because it’s the presence of the Living Jesus that changes everything: “Surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

III. Hope has a Name

Mountain scenes are the most common place where God reveals God’s self in the Biblical story.

1. On Mt. Hermon, God reveals his Name, “I Am” to Moses (Ex 3)
2. On Mt. Sinai, God reveals more of his name (Ex 34)
3. On Golgotha, the mountain outside Jerusalem, Jesus is crucified – enthroned as the King who is “compassionate and gracious” (Mt 27:33; Ex 34)
4. On this mountain in Galilee Jesus reveals that the one God is “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19)

“...baptizing them in the **name** of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” – Matthew 28:19

The One true God is, Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus is revealing that what we mean when we say God is: Father, Son, and Spirit. A community of love that has always existed. That has always existed and draws us inside that unity.

You can trust him because this God is the God who would give his life to make you his forever – and who will be with you no matter what.

How do we respond?

Practicing Hope

“Hope” and “optimism” are not the same thing. The optimist looks at the world and feels good about the way it’s going. Things are looking up! Everything is going to be all right! But hope, at least as conceived within the Jewish and then the early Christian world, was quite different. Hope could be, and often was, a dogged and deliberate choice when the world seemed dark. It depended not on a feeling about the way things were or the way they were moving, but on faith, faith in the One God. This God had made the world. This God had called Israel to be his people.”

– N.T. Wright

“Hope” in this sense is not a feeling. It is a virtue. You have to practice it, like a difficult piece on the violin or a tricky shot at tennis. You practice the virtue of hope through worship and prayer, through invoking the One God, through reading and reimagining the scriptural story, and through consciously holding the unknown future within the unshakable divine promises.”

– N.T. Wright

How do I answer, “Is it all going to be okay?” Like this:

“If God is for us, who can be against us?... Christ Jesus who died—more than that, **who was raised to life**—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”

... “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

– Romans 8:31-39

Life Group Discussion and Reflection:

Open Up

Share about a moment where the hope of Jesus' resurrection either became deeply meaningful to you or challenged you to think differently about your life.

Dig In

1. **Try to imagine yourself alongside the women as you read Matthew 28:1-10.** In what ways would you share their emotional state? How might their worship of Jesus, where they "clasped his feet", inspire you to respond to Jesus with greater joy, abandon, or gratitude?
2. **If a friend or co-worker** asked if you really believed all this, how might you respond based on Matthew 28 and some of the reasons for believing in the historicity of the resurrection (see the above notes for some of the reasons we can trust the Gospel reports)? Which of these ideas has been most important for you? How might you also express your own "experience" of Jesus?
3. **Read Matthew 28:16-20.** What fears do you have when it comes to joining the women, and later the disciples, in the mission of making the news of Jesus known in your everyday life? How might the promises of this text help you to "not be afraid" but "go"?
4. Read this quote from N.T. Wright: "Hope" in this sense is not a feeling. It is a virtue. You have to practice it, like a difficult piece on the violin or a tricky shot at tennis. You practice the virtue of hope through worship and prayer, through invoking the One God, through reading and reimagining the scriptural story, and through consciously holding the unknown future within the unshakable divine promises." – N.T. Wright

Are there ways that you would like to more deeply "practice" hope in the upcoming year? What might that look like for you?

Prayer: Take time to give thanks to God that everything sad *will* come untrue because of the resurrection of Jesus. Share any requests you may have with your LifeGroup, and lift these to God, knowing deep in your bones that nothing "in all creation, will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom 8:39).