

A Living Hope Easter 2023

It was nearly fifteen years ago that Barack Obama stood on a stage in Chicago and addressed an adoring crowd after winning the presidential election. The euphoria in Grant Park that evening had even the news anchors and pundits at a loss for words. Some were visibly emotional, informing the viewing audience that, with this new leader, America stood on the threshold of unprecedented progress.

MSNBC's Chris Matthews said, "I've been following politics since I was about five. I've never seen anything like this. This is bigger than Kennedy. Obama comes along, and he seems to have the answers. This is the New Testament."

Newsweek editor Evan Thomas wrote, "In a way, Obama is standing above the country, above the world. He's sort of God. He's going to bring all the different sides together."

Film director Spike Lee said, "You'll have to measure time, 'Before Obama,' 'After Obama'... everything's going to be affected by this seismic change in the universe" (Klein, *The Amateur*, 62-63).

Hmm. The *New Testament*? A sort of *God*? *Time measured* by this man? Sounds like someone else I know. Except for the outcome. I don't know anyone, including these men, who, at the end of his eight-year presidency, thought that President Obama lived up to all the hype and hopes placed on him. Turns out, he wasn't the Messiah after all. He had flaws and made mistakes and didn't deliver on all his promises. He *couldn't* deliver on all of them...and he *couldn't* live up to all those expectations. For one reason. He's only human.

So is President Trump and President Biden and whoever wins the election next year. As talented and winsome and intelligent and competent as they may be, they are mere mortals. And yet, we will be having these same conversations next year about whoever the candidate might be. Because it seems we suffer from a collective bout of amnesia every four years. We keep pinning our hopes for the nation's welfare and salvation on powerful people, forgetting that it didn't work last time...or the time before that...or the time before that.

But I think I know why we do it. We're looking for a savior. We want someone who can ensure our safety and well-being; someone who can elevate us to greatness; someone who can defeat our enemies (or at least keep them at bay); someone who can establish lasting peace and prosperity.

By the way, it's not just Americans who do this. People have been doing this since time began. These are the hopes that the disciples and supporters of Jesus had placed on Him, and for good reason. They had spent virtually every waking hour with Jesus for three years and knew Him well. They had seen Him in virtually every conceivable circumstance and had never ceased to be amazed by Him—His wisdom, His purity, His patience, His power, His love. He *never* disappointed them, and the more they were with Him the more impressed they were with Him.

But that all changed on a Friday afternoon when Jesus was killed like a common criminal. And the hopes and dreams of His devastated disciples died with Him. They were convinced He was the Messiah. They thought He would overthrow the Roman Empire and establish His kingdom—a kingdom of peace and prosperity for God's people. They thought they would be His cabinet members, administering His will. But it was not to be. For He was dead. And death is final; death is irreversible; death is the end.

Which is why, in the hours following His death, they were devastated.

When I was in Israel several years ago, we asked our Jewish tour guide to describe the Messiah that he and some of his countrymen were looking for. “Oh”, he said, “he’ll be a lot like Jesus. He’ll be a prophet, a great teacher and leader, he’ll perform miracles, he will even suffer and be rejected by many. But he won’t die.”

It makes perfect sense. What possible good can a dead man do? He may be a source of inspiration, but you certainly can’t count on him to be your king.

Which brings us to Sunday morning, three days after Jesus had died and was buried. It had been another fitful night for the former followers of Jesus. Not only were their emotions swirling, but there had been an earthquake during the night, which, more than likely, intensified their despair.

And so, before dawn, Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary and at least two other women, hoping to calm their restless spirits and soothe their sorrow, went to look at the tomb. As they approached, their hearts must have skipped a beat as they saw that the massive stone had been rolled away.

Perplexed, they entered the tomb and found that the body of Jesus was gone. Angels appeared to them saying, *“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen.”*

Shocked and excited they ran to tell the disciples and on the way Jesus Himself appeared to them. But when they reached the disciples, they could not and would not believe them. People don’t rise from the dead. Death is final! Death is irreversible!

Later that day, however, Jesus Himself appeared to Peter, and then to ten of the disciples, and later to more than 500, before He ascended into heaven after forty days. They touched Him. They put their hands in His wounds. They ate with Him. They conversed with Him and they were absolutely convinced that Jesus was alive.

Jesus, their Leader, their teacher, their friend had come back to life! And so convinced were they that they spent the rest of their lives with *one* ambition—to bear witness to *this* event—to declare that Jesus was risen! So convinced were they that all of them were willing to experience persecution, abuse, imprisonment—all but one of them were murdered because they would not deny or recant their testimony in the bodily resurrection of Christ.

That’s because Jesus’ resurrection proved that He was who He said He was and who the disciples thought He was—the Messiah, Son of the living God. It established that His death on the cross did accomplish what He said it would—the forgiveness of sins and the defeat of the powers of darkness. But it also proved that He won the victory over our ultimate enemy, death itself.

It proves that all of His claims are reliable and true. And one of those claims was this: *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn. 11:25-26).*

Isn’t that the ultimate issue of life? All of us are going to die, but then what? Is there something we can look forward to beyond the grave, and if there is, will it be eternal life in heaven?

Most people don’t like to think about death and go to great lengths *not* to think about it. But when a loved one dies and we *have* to think about it, it’s common for people to say something like, “I know he/she is in a better place.” Sometimes we say such things in order to comfort ourselves or those who are grieving with us. Sometimes it's because we just don't want to consider another alternative. In other words, when we are *forced* to face mortality, we at least *want* to

believe that there *is* a heaven, and that we and our loved ones will go there when we die. But how do we know if there really *is*, or whether our belief about it isn't just wishful thinking?

It's because after He died, He rose from the dead. Listen to what Peter wrote thirty years after He saw the risen Christ with His own eyes.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5 ESV).

The hope that we have is a "living" hope, a hope that Peter is intentionally contrasting with the false hopes of this world. Presidents, politicians, institutions, social reforms, technology, healthcare, money, power, ingenuity, resourcefulness.

When we put our hope in anything in this world, we will inevitably be disappointed, because, according to the New Testament, "the world and everything in it is passing away" (1 John 2:17). We use the phrase "pass away" to refer to death. Things in this world are a "dead hope." They may flame for a while, but they will inevitably flicker, and then be snuffed out.

But we have a *living* hope, a hope that is bigger stronger, and more enduring than anything in this world, because it is not based on anything in this world. A hope that remains firm even when we face our greatest challenges—including death itself, because death is not the end of our existence.

Jesus' resurrection gives us the assurance that there is more to life than what we experience with the five senses. There is a greater reality. The reality of a place which transcends time and space—heaven—and the reality of a real, living Person, who, at this moment, is being worshiped by angels and loved ones who have gone before us—who surround His throne day and night, never ceasing to be amazed at His beauty, His glory, His majesty, His love, His kindness, His power.

Our hope is living because He is living.

I want to submit to you that what Jesus did two thousand years ago on a Sunday morning three days after He died on the cross and was buried is the most consequential event in the history of the world. It is the event that has literally altered the course of man's destiny.

And it can alter the course of your destiny if you believe that Jesus did what He did for you.

Please note that only the first sermonette is available to be read. To access both sermonettes, we encourage you to watch or listen to the service.