

Hope (Right When We Need It)

Well hey church family, hope you're doing well. If you have a bible nearby, turn with me to Romans 8. Once again, Jeff mentioned this earlier, but let's once again state the abundantly obvious: this is **a very different kind of Easter**. As the pastor of a church, you always want Easter Sunday to be big. Like, I cringe anytime someone uses the word *epic* to describe anything church-related, but you kind of want Easter to be...*epic*. It's the day that we celebrate that Jesus is back from the dead! So if there's one day that you pull out all the stops, it's Easter. *Jesus is alive, so let's make a big deal out of it and tell everybody about it.*

But **this Easter is quite different** for me and for most every other pastor I know. For most of us, we're in a mostly empty room, with maybe a video camera, maybe a small video crew—filming or streaming our best attempt at an Easter service. And I think we can just admit together: that's significantly less good than most of the other ways there are to do Easter services.

And I would say **it's actually really important that we admit that**. Because it's only once we admit it that we can *grieve* it and the other negative effects that this Coronavirus pandemic has had on our world. **Grief is actually a vital part of any type of loss or tragedy, especially one the size and scope of COVID-19 situation.** In fact, there was an article that came out just a few weeks ago in the Harvard Business Review titled *That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief*.¹ And it was an article meant to help us as a society come to terms with the importance of *grieving* everything happening in our world during March and April of 2020.

And **grief is not something we are super familiar with** as a society-at-large. To be certain, many of us *have* experienced grief on an *individual level* with the death of family members or close friends, but hardly any of us have a framework for the *collective* grief we're feeling on a *global scale* over the past couple months. Most of us, after all, have lived during periods of relative prosperity, ease, and comfort in America. So a global pandemic and a likely recession is going to be a very new experience for most of us. **And in many ways, *grieving* is not something we have a ton of experience doing.**

On the one hand, **this virus will eventually be a thing of the past.** It may take quite a toll before then, but at some point, COVID-19 will be something we talk about in the past

¹ You can read the article in its entirety [here](#).

tense. I think all of the experts agree on *that* much. But **on the other hand, things will be different as a result of all this.** In the grief article I mentioned, it uses the example of how *airline travel* changed, really *permanently* after 9/11. We don't go through airport security today the same way we did before all that happened. A favorite comedian of mine is fond of saying that before 9/11, airport security consisted of a "high five and a sports tap" as you went through the metal detector. It's nowhere near that easy now. By contrast, now some of us get anxious just *walking up* to the TSA agent because we don't know what they're going to do or how long it's going to take.

But all of this to say, **this whole ordeal we're in now will involve loss, and change, and things will be different than they were before as a result of it.** And we can try to ignore that or wish it away—or we can deal with it head-on and actually *grieve* it. And I think it's important that we deal with it for both our emotional health and our spiritual health. **Following Jesus must allow room for real, and even *enduring* grief.**

You know, a lot of people assume that *faith* is a means to happiness. That the goal of believing in God is to have a sort of divine therapist up in the sky who can help put you in a better mood when things go wrong. Or maybe at least, he can *distract* you from all the unpleasant things happening in the world. But at least when it comes to *Christianity*, that's not really the case at all. I've always appreciated C.S. Lewis' take on that. He says:

"I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

You've gotta appreciate his honesty. Christianity is *not* a means to happiness. It's *not even a distraction* from *unhappiness*. It's not a means of *escape* from unpleasant feelings in our world. After all, **right smack in the middle of our faith is a gruesome story about how the guy we all worship as God was tortured within inches of his life and then killed.** Not exactly a detail you leave in there if the goal is to give everyone pleasant feelings. So that's not what Christianity *is*.

Rather, I would argue that **a true encounter with the Christian faith will guide you right into the heart of grief and loss and brokenness, well before it leads you away from it.** And **that brings us to our passage** for today, Romans 8. Here is how the apostle Paul describes the human experience, specifically through the lens of Christianity. Read with me in v. 22:

[22] *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

So Paul, attempting to describe the current state of affairs in the world, chooses the term “groaning.” Interesting choice of words, right? He doesn’t say we’re “humming along.” He doesn’t say that we’re “effortlessly gliding into a utopian future.” We’re not “clicking on all cylinders.” But “groaning.” But he doesn’t just at describing it as “groaning”—he wants to make sure you understand the specific *type of groaning* he’s referring to. He says it’s the types of groans you hear from a *woman in the pains of childbirth*. And he is saying this pre-morphine and epidurals. So really, “groaning” is probably putting it delicately. Maybe “screaming” or “terrified shrieks of horror” would better describe it. However you want to put it, my simple point is that **Paul does not hold back when he describes the state of our world. He says “the entire creation is groaning.”**

Now keep reading in v. 23 of the passage with me:

[23] *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.*

So it’s not just that *creation around us is groaning*, **we also are groaning**, Paul says. We also realize that things are not as they should be. We look around and see things like poverty, greed, racism, sexism, abuse, corruption, and dozens of other things going on that are precisely not how the world should be. And *right now*, we look and see country after country doing everything they can to contain the spread of a potentially deadly virus. **We all collectively know that this is not how things are supposed to be.** No one, **even the most callous person** can look at something like the coronavirus and go, “well I’m glad natural selection is really doing its job! Survival of the fittest is happening—let’s cheer it on!” No, we all see what’s happening, the devastation around us, and we *grieve*. To *grieve* is to *groan*.

But then, Paul says that **all of this groaning**—all of this mourning and grieving and being frustrated by the world as it is—**is pointing us to something**. Something that he calls “our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” Now what could that be talking about there? Well in short, he’s talking about what the bible calls “the **new heavens and the new earth**.” That one day, followers of Jesus will inhabit a world where everything that makes us *groan* now is no longer a reality. A place where cancer does not exist. A place

where car accidents don't happen. A place where nobody dies too young, or even dies at all. And a place where pandemics don't exist. This is the future we're headed for if we belong to Jesus.

So why would Paul bring that up? Well we read why in v. 24:

[24] For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? [25] But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

So the reason he brings it up is because **that reality—the new heavens and the new earth—gives us “hope.”** Now let's talk briefly about this, because as we've often said around our church, I don't know that the word “hope” means what most people think it means. *Hope*, for most people, sounds like some sort of vague, naive optimism. As in, “well, I hope it doesn't rain today!” “I hope the Vols are finally on the upswing!” Or more practically right now, “I hope I don't catch the Coronavirus!” We use the word “hope” like we use the word “wish”—it means “I'm completely uncertain about something, but I'm trying to be positive about it.” So it's easy for us to *assume* that when the bible mentions “hope,” it's talking about some sort of vague positivity.

But that's actually **not what Paul means at all.** For Paul, **hope is not based in uncertainty, but rather certainty.** He uses the word “hope” like we'd use a word like “expect” or “anticipate.” For Paul, to *hope* for something means to be *sure* of it. **To know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's coming, even if you don't know precisely how or when.** So, to use *his* metaphor, a woman experiencing labor pains when she's nine months pregnant *knows* that those pains are because she is about to have a baby. She's not confused as to why that pain is there. In fact, it's actually the pain itself that *points her forward* to what's coming. And in the same way, **Paul wants us as followers of Jesus to allow the grief, the fear, the anxiety point forward to what's coming.** That's what it means to *hope*.

So don't hear this wrong, this is **not some sort of trite response** from Paul towards suffering. He's not saying, “don't worry, one day you'll be in heaven, so you don't *have to be sad* now.” No—**just as there are real tears, real pain, and real anxiety in a delivery room, Paul expects there to be real tears, real pain, and real anxiety this side of the new heavens and new earth.** But also in a delivery room, all of those things are pointing *forward* to something beautiful. They're all *headed* somewhere. And what Paul

is trying to get us to see is that all of *this* is *headed* somewhere. It's pointing *forward* to something.

And **what it's pointing forward to will one day, completely eclipse everything you feel before you get there.** That's precisely what Paul tries to get across, just **a few verses earlier** in Romans 8, in v. 18:

[18] For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Just like **the joy a new mom feels** holding her baby *outweighs* the pain she felt beforehand, so will the new heavens and new earth far overshadow the pain we currently experience. Speaking of that day, **Revelation 21** says this:

[4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." [5] And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

So **there's the promise.** That there is a day coming—maybe in a thousand years, or maybe *tomorrow*—where *groaning* will give way to *rejoicing*. Where there will no longer be any tears. Or death. Or mourning. Or pain. Or cancer. Or contagious diseases. Or freak accidents. Those things will be over, once and for all, because Jesus will have made every single thing, *new*.

And **that is what Easter is all about.** It's about *hope*, right when we need it. Because the story of Easter is that one early morning, when the disciples thought all was lost, they showed up to a tomb to grieve all of that, and found that tomb *empty*. They discovered that God had already begun the process of making all things new. That in the here and now, he had set into motion a world where dead people come back to life. Where sin and death aren't the end of the story. And where things become, finally, just as they should be.

So **in the coming days and weeks,** we don't know exactly what's going to happen in *our* world, just like the disciples didn't back *then*. All the data points to the fact that, at least for Tennessee, the worst of it is still ahead of us. And we might be in this bizarre holding pattern for a few more weeks, or a couple months. The simple fact is we *just don't know*

at this point. But **what we do know** is that a day is coming where all of this is a distant memory. And through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God has begun that process in the here and now.

In the book of **1 Corinthians**, Paul speaks about Jesus' resurrection as a kind of "**firstfruits**"—that's the language he uses there. And what he means is that Jesus' *resurrection* actually *guarantees* that that wonderful day in the future. **Think about it like this: this time of the year, all the colors on the trees start to make their appearance. Trees that have had nothing on their branches for months, all of a sudden turn green and yellow and pink and all sorts of colors. And when we see the trees start doing that, we know that spring is coming. That warmer days are coming. That lake weather, and pool weather, and beach weather are coming.** So in a way, those *colors on the trees* are the "firstfruits" of all of that. They point us forward to what's coming. // And Paul says in a similar way, the fact that our savior, after being killed, came back to life, is the *firstfruits* of the new heavens and the new earth.

So **this Easter, when we have plenty of reasons to grieve**, let's grieve. We have plenty of reasons to *groan*, so let's *groan*. But as we grieve, and as we groan, we *hope*. Those things are not mutually exclusive. We can mourn the world as it is, and *also* anticipate the day when all things are made new. May it be so. Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank you that you are making all things new, and that you will one day make all things new. God we admit that a lot of times it's hard to see it. Sometimes it's not happening at the pace we'd want it to. But God we hope in the fact that we know it's happening. And we ask that you would **help us to hope**. God, would you help us operate, not with a naive optimism about the brokenness in our world, but with real, gritty, hard-fought, messy, **hope**. God we thank you that through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have a guarantee that the day is coming when all things are made right. Would you help us to fix our hope there, to fix our eyes there. Amen.*

Let's celebrate the resurrection of Jesus together through **song**.