

**Date:** March 30-31, 2024

**Title:** Easter = Hope

**Scripture:** Acts 24-26

**Speaker:** Kurt Bjorklund

Happy Easter! It is great to be together. I just want to say a special thanks to those of you who rearranged your schedules to come to this time. I know it's probably not the ideal time, but your generosity of spirit allowed the church to welcome capacity, plus capacity crowds earlier in the weekend without swamping it. So, thank you for that.

Let's pray together. God, as we're gathered here today, I pray that you would speak to each of us. I ask that my words reflect your word in content and in tone and in emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

A friend of mine sent me an article recently, and it was about this survey that annually measures the happiness of people all over the world. I don't know exactly how they measure happiness, and I don't think anyone's ever tried to measure my happiness. So, I'm not really sure how that all works. But what was interesting about it was that the happiness of Americans seems to be declining. Americans have typically been in the top 20 and for the first time in recent years, they had fallen out of the top 20.

And as I dug into the research on it just a little bit, the data that was there said that part of the reason that Americans happiness has declined is because people who are coming of age, teenagers, young adults, kind of the emerging generation, feels a lot of hopelessness. They feel hopelessness in part because of just general loneliness. They feel hopelessness in part because when they look at the nation and the way things are evolving, they're saying, I'm not sure that there's hope. Maybe it has to do with the economy, but there's just a sense of hopelessness. And whether that's unique to a generation or it's more universal, what's clear is that Americans sense of satisfaction and happiness has declined.

But if Easter is about anything, it's about hope. I say it's about hope because one of the central claims of Christianity is that Jesus rose from the dead. And that is a statement that is full of hope because if it is true that Jesus rose from the dead, it means it's true that Jesus is divine and that you can know who God is. If Jesus rose from the dead, it means it's true that salvation is by grace alone, and it has been paid for by Jesus. Therefore, it isn't about my performance or your performance and some arbitrary standard that you're hoping to meet so that one day maybe you'll be okay. If Jesus is risen from the dead, what it means is that the future is bright, and God holds the future in His hands. Whatever loss or hardship, whatever difficulty you've had to walk through in recent days, it's not the end of the story.

The apostle Paul in Romans 8 verse 18, said this. He said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." In other words, what I'm experiencing now, he says, compared to what will be, isn't that big of a thing. If you have faith in this risen Jesus, what it means is that you can say that your best days are all in front of you, and one day you'll be able to say with confidence that your worst days are all behind you.

Now, Jesus rising from the dead is one of those central claims. And in order to look at this today, what I'd like to do is look at an account in Acts chapters 24 through 26. Don't worry, we won't read the whole thing. Here's what is happening in this place. We have the Apostle Paul, going through a season where he is basically trying to defend this idea that Jesus rose from the dead. And he stands trial with three different leaders of that time, and their reactions show us something about the reaction to the resurrection.

Here's what Paul does. Paul basically begins and affirms this idea that Jesus rose from the dead. And so, he sees the resurrection, I'm going to say, is something to embrace. Here's where we see this. Acts 24 verses 14 through 16. It says this. "However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect." So, even in Paul's day, people who followed Jesus found themselves at odds with the polite culture of their day. This is what Paul found. He says, "I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man."

Then in chapter 25 verse 19, it says this. "Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive." And that belief changed everything about his life. He says I strive to live my life with a clean conscience before God and man. His belief wasn't just this belief that somehow gave him comfort for some ethereal future. It was a belief that drove everything about how he lived. And when he came to affirm it, it meant that he began to align his life with that reality, and it was radical in what it did for him. He went from persecuting the church to propagating the message of Jesus Christ. And if you or I come to embrace the resurrection, the reality that Jesus really is alive, it's not just a polite religious belief, but it is a life altering belief that changes us radically.

N.T. Wright, a well-known scholar, says this about the resurrection. He said, "The message of the resurrection is that this present world matters; that the problems and pains of this present world matter; that the living God has made a decisive bridgehead into this present world with this healing and all-conquering love; and that, in the name of this strong love, all the evils, all the injustices and all the pains of the present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won the day." And then he says, "That's why we pray 'thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven'..."

And then listen to this. Here's what he says. "Christianity [is not] simply a warmth-in-the-heart religion [but] a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in heaven religion. It [is not] focused on me and my survival, my spirituality [but] on God's world that still needs the kingdom-message. The gospel is good news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts ... That is why we who [worship] do so with material things: water (when people are baptized); bread and wine at the Eucharist... and above all, music. The world of creation has been reclaimed by the living and healing God."

Now, you may say well, that's a nice idea, but how can I affirm this, believe this? And certainly, in just a few moments, it's hard to defend something that took place so long ago. There are great books on this, other Easter messages that we've done here at Orchard Hill that speak to this. But let me just give you a couple of thoughts. One of the things that's really clear is that

the tomb was empty. Josephus, who is a historian, did not believe in the way, the sect, whatever you want to call it, wrote, affirming that the tomb was empty.

And so, what that means is you have to decide, was the tomb empty from some natural cause or was it this supernatural resurrection of Jesus from the dead? And the way people have explained it who've come down on the side of it isn't supernatural, it has an explanation, are generally these. One, that the disciples got the wrong tomb. What that means is that they went to have Jesus buried, and when they got there, they came back the next day and said, oh no, it was over here. Then they started Christianity kind of out of the idea that the tomb was empty. But here's the problem with that. In the biblical text, it says that the Romans placed a guard at the tomb. And when you and I hear that, you hear guard, and you think a single guard. But the guard, the word that's used there, is a word that means like an elite fighting troop, a whole troop of guards. In other words, it's highly unlikely that the guards were guarding the wrong tomb. The disciples got it all mixed up, and they were just confused.

Now some other people will say well, maybe Jesus wasn't really dead. Maybe he was just mostly dead. And because of that, when he got in the cool tomb, he was rejuvenated, and he came back to strength. He rolled the tomb away, took on the guards that were there, this elite fighting force, and overpowered them and came off, and they went and lied. Now again, a little unlikely.

The other explanation, probably the most likely, is that if you're going to go with this non-supernatural route, is that the disciples stole the body. That they wanted to propagate the idea that Jesus would rise from the dead, although they didn't believe that he was going to even before this. And the problem with it, besides them taking on this elite fighting force, is a ragtag group of people who could hardly find their way through Jerusalem is that they all, most all of them, went to their deaths saying Jesus is alive. So, there's something here to say, I can believe it. But again, belief isn't merely an intellectual tip of the hat, but it means aligning my life with the things that Jesus says.

There's an account of a man named Charles Blondin, who in the 1800s allegedly was a high wire performer. So, he would strap a rope across different heights and then walk across it and do different tricks on the ropes. One time, he supposedly went to Niagara Falls and had a rope strung across it, a crowd gathered, and he started to work the crowd. Do you think that I can walk across this? And they said yeah. So, he walked across it and came back. He said do you think that I can do it again? They said yes, yes, you can do it. And he walked across again. And then he said, well, do you think I can do it holding this pole? And they're like yes, yes, you can do it. So, he does it. He comes back. He says, how about pushing this wheelbarrow? Yes, yes, you can do it. He walks across with the wheelbarrow and comes back. He says o you think I can do it with somebody in the wheelbarrow? They're like yes, yes, you can do it. So, he says okay, who wants to go now? I don't know about you, but if I were there that day, I probably would have said no, not so interested, not sure I want to try that.

But here's the point. If you believe that Jesus is alive and that He's God, then it doesn't make sense to not align your life to Him, to not put your faith in him in such a way that you'll get in the wheelbarrow, figuratively speaking. So, the resurrection for some is something to embrace.

Now, for these different leaders, it had a different effect. For Felix, who's the first one that we come to, this was something to fear. And I say this because chapter 24, verses 22 and following tells the story. It says, "Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. 'When Lysias the commander comes,' he said, 'I will decide your case.' He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.' At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison."

So, what's happening here? Why do I say he was afraid or saw something to fear? You see, the text says that he was afraid. So, what was he afraid of? Was he afraid of the reaction of the people? That might be how you first read that. But the issue with that is if you read all the context, he actually wasn't afraid of the people. I think the clue is actually in this phrase, his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. And the reason I say that is if you read some history about her, she was the daughter of Herod and Agrippa. So, one of the Herod's from earlier time, and she married somebody else. Felix seduced her and got her to leave her husband and to come. And so, when it says he was afraid, my take, especially when it says that Paul is talking about righteousness, self-control, and judgment, and then it says directly he was afraid, that what he was afraid of was either that he was going to have to acknowledge that he wasn't right in everything that he had done, or that God would somehow ask him to do something different.

Now, you may say well, I can admit that I haven't done everything right, but probably some of us have some things that we don't actually want to come to terms with before God and say, God, this hasn't been in your way or your will. And so, we try to avoid dealing with the resurrection, or maybe we have a fear that God will ask us to give up something that we're not willing to give up. And so, for us, the whole resurrection, Jesus alive, is something to be afraid of in some sense. But what's unfortunate about that is that we miss this idea of something to embrace, that this is actually where we find hope.

When I was a kid, my family lived in a town called Rockford, Illinois for a few years. It was my mom's hometown. So, my maternal grandparents lived there. My mom and dad would often take us there and leave us while they took care of other things, and we would play. What I remember most about this house, because I was young, is that it sat on the top of a hill and if you walked down the hill, turned a corner and another, there was a Baskin-Robbins. There would often be afternoon walks to the Baskin-Robbins and then we would come back.

I remember that one day my grandfather came out and he said hey, do you want to go for a walk? I was playing in the front yard, and I said well, where are you going? He said well, do you want to go for a walk? I said where are you going? He said do you want to go for a walk? I said where are you going? He said do you want to go for a walk? I said, I guess not. I have

important things to do. I'm playing here. And so, he disappears down the hill. Predictably, a little while later, he appears with an ice cream cone, and I was bereft. I was like oh, Grandpa, why wouldn't you let me know that you were going for ice cream? And you know how you have some moments in life where you can just remember how things went down. He looked at me and he said if you had wanted to take a walk with me, it wouldn't have mattered where I was going.

And see, what some of us want to do is, say well, I'll walk with you, Jesus, if you go where I want you to go. But I'm afraid that if you go somewhere I don't want you to take me, that it's not worth following you. And what we actually need to do is recognize that he is good, that the God who's alive is for us and wants our best, and that our most hopeful path is in alignment with what he calls us to do.

Some of us will say maybe the resurrection is something to fear. The next leader is Festus, and I believe that he saw the resurrection as something to navigate. We see his story in Chapter 25 in verses 4 and 5. It says this. "Festus answered, 'Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me, and if the man has done anything wrong, they can press charges against him there.'" So, he's negotiating kind of with the crowd that wanted his life. In verse 9, "Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" Verse 12, "After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

Now, just to cut through those verses and give you the context. What he basically was doing was he was trying to negotiate and navigate what was a tight spot for him because there was a crowd that wanted Paul killed because he said Jesus had come back to life. And he didn't really believe that that was right so he was afraid that if he did that, he would be in trouble on other counts. And so, he was trying to find this perfect middle ground where he didn't have to fully give in to this idea that Jesus was alive, and that Paul wasn't guilty, or that he was taking a stand against it. Here's what some of us do with this resurrection. We try to navigate the idea of a living God with our culture and with our beliefs.

I was recently listening to some podcasts, and I had two podcasts that came up on my feed and one succession was an interview that was done with Marilynne Robinson. She's just written a book on Genesis. She's written several novels and faith-based books. I haven't read the book on Genesis yet. Whether you agree with all of her takes on Genesis or not, what was striking about it is, as she talked about faith in a God who created a good God, a benevolent God, what she talked about was this joyful hope, basically, of what it is to encounter this God. At one point she was talking about trees, and she said trees are amazing if you think about it because they have all these functions, all these ways that they serve humanity. God could have just made them functional, and yet he chose to make them beautiful and unique and spectacular when you look at them. She was filled with this hopeful anticipation as she talked about the wonder of creation and a living God.

Then my next podcast came up, and it was an NPR podcast that had an interview with a woman named Sarah McCammon. She had left the church of her youth, and she's written a book on it. And as I heard her talk, she's respectful of her church background, but I didn't necessarily blame her for leaving the church that she was part of because there were some

things that sounded in excess. But she had in many ways left kind of the idea of faith, at least that kind of faith in God somewhat behind her, even though there was some view of God. And at one point she was talking about taking her kids to different religious services and how she would sometimes quote scripture to them. But she said, when I do, I'm careful to quote it, just like I would any other piece of antiquity that's wisdom that they can choose to believe or not because she had this sense of saying I'm trying to navigate. And there was a sadness in juxtaposition to Marilynne Robinson in her words.

You see, if you try to navigate this idea of Jesus, in some ways you'll be more miserable than if you simply reject it. And what I mean is what you'll do is you'll say, I want Jesus, but I don't actually want Jesus to be in control. I want the benefits without the alignment. And what it will do is it will leave you in this place where instead of being hopeful, you will feel the weight in many ways of God and judgment and righteousness, and yet you won't feel the relief that comes from saying I have embraced who Jesus Christ is.

There's one other leader here and it's Agrippa, and this is in 25 and 26. And for Agrippa, I think the resurrection of Jesus and Paul was something to defer. Here's what we see in chapter 25, verses 23 and following. It says this. "The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer."

And then in Chapter 26, we see this in verses 25 and following. "'I am not insane, most excellent Festus,' Paul replied. 'What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.' Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?' Paul replied, 'Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.'"

What he was doing in many ways was trying to just defer the whole thing. He had enough evidence, enough beliefs, but he was saying, I don't want to deal with this right now. Maybe this is you. You have heard and kind of believe, but right now you're saying, I need to get my career on track, I need to get my marriage on track. If I follow Jesus now, there will be some choices that I don't want to make. So, one day I'll get serious about it. But the problem with that is if Jesus is alive, then to say one day I'll come back to you, one day I'll let you be the king of me as you're the king of everything, but just not right now. That makes no sense. And if Jesus isn't alive, then having a halfway kind of faith doesn't make sense.

But I believe Jesus is alive and Jesus is forcing a decision in many ways. If you ever been on a crowded street and a bus or a truck comes down the road and you're forced to one side or another, it's a little bit what it's like with Jesus. He's forcing you, forcing me, to say either he's alive and he's the ruler, the rightful ruler of the world and of me, or he's not. And if he is, if he is alive, then that's where we find hope.

I saw somewhere recently that on Google it's asked every minute, over 200 times, is God real. That's an amazing question. I would guess that in recent days, that number has gone up as pirate fans have started to Google that. But think about people asking that question. Do you know what they're asking? Is there hope? See, Jesus being alive, is the answer to that. And you or me saying, I affirm that, I align my life with that, I embrace it, is a way of saying God, I want the hope that Jesus Christ provides. And that's our hope today as we celebrate Easter together.

Would you just bow your head, close your eyes with me for a moment, and pray? And as you do that, I just want to say that there's probably a lot of different ways that we come here. Some of us are here and we're saying, I don't know. Are you trying to convince me in 30 minutes that Jesus is the answer? Yes. But I know for some of you that may seem like a bridge too far today. Maybe for you, if you felt something, felt the tug of God on your heart, maybe it's just saying I'm going to be a part of one of the locations of Orchard Hill and *The Stories Jesus Told* in the coming weeks. Maybe you grab a book on resurrection from somebody like N.T. Wright and consider its truthfulness.

Or maybe you are here today and you're saying I know that that my life has not felt hopeful. I do know that the answer is in Jesus. And you can take that step today by acknowledging your sin, your less than perfect life, which is what sin is, and saying Jesus has made the way. So, I don't need to fear coming to God.

Or maybe you're here and you've believed for a long time. But the truth is, you started to let fear, navigation, or deference be an excuse for aligning your life with the King of Kings from getting in the wheelbarrow figuratively speaking. Maybe today is just your day to say God, I don't want to be somebody who believes with a casual non-life altering faith, but I want to align all of who I am to the living, ruling, returning King of Kings.

God help us to not just have a nice belief and a nice account, but instead to have a belief that changes us to our very core and brings hope in a world that sometimes does feel hopeless. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.