

**“Reality and Resurrection –
9/11, Afghanistan and Easter”
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Dr. Jerry Nelson
www.soundliving.org**

I visited Death this past week.

I sat in his presence in a hospital and watched him do his final work on a man’s body.

I sat alone except for the dying man and death and I wept.

I wept for the tragedy culminating before my eyes.

I wept for what had been and what would be no more -
a son, a brother, a husband, a father and
grandfather.

A strong man, dying.

A life, a long life, a full life of service to others, ending.

Someone had posted a few pictures on the wall –
reminders of his work and interests.

And I thought that no one even knows of that
lifetime of investment except a few family members
and in one short generation even that will be
remembered no more.

I sat there with the perspective of an entire life condensed into one
fleeting moment.

I could see it from birth, through youth and adulthood and now
as it ends –

1 Peter 1:24 “All men are like grass, and all their glory is
like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the
flowers fall...”

In those melancholy moments life seemed so short, so quickly
passed, so easily snuffed out, so fragile, even so meaningless.

In the midst of the Ravensbruck concentration camp of WWII, a
young woman was told to have hope.

Looking at the life-less dirt compound around her, the deteriorating bodies of her friends and the smoke from the ever-burning incinerators, she said, "What's the use, everything dies here!"

Such despair is easy to understand.

Can you imagine living in Israel today?

It seems that never a day passes without a bomb blowing in some restaurant, bus, office building – places so much like the ones we frequent every day.

Then consider Afghanistan.

The Afghanis were living under the crushing weight of poverty and oppression and then they were hit with war and earthquakes – the scenes are horrifying, the unimaginable is happening.

How can people live under that?

Even we sheltered Americans saw our house of cards crash down on September 11.

Suddenly, what some of the rest of the world lives with daily, came home to us.

The icons of affluence and power – the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – were smashed.

Nearly all the social commentators admitted "Everything has changed." – we are vulnerable!

The following Sunday our churches were filled.

Why? Denial was no longer a possible response to reality. And people wanted an alternative to the despair that tempted them.

Somewhat mercifully, we can live much of life undistracted by that hard edge of life.

I'm glad that my four-year-old is unmolested by the reality of Afghanistan, Israel, and 9/11.

It isn't all bad that even we adults busy ourselves with our everyday affairs and are distracted momentarily from the reality of the death and destruction around us.

But in the weeks after September 11, reality began to settle into the American consciousness.

 Anthrax, terrorist threats, and images of our own soldiers being brought home in caskets forced us into a broader perspective of reality.

 The whirlwind moved us all and we realize with Dorothy, "we aren't in Kansas anymore."

When the dark side of life penetrates our consciousness or overwhelms our awareness the two most common responses are **despair or denial**.

When I watch death suck the life out of a man or I see pictures of an orphaned Afghani child crying amidst the rubble of what was once his home I am tempted to **despair**.

 When I get up in the morning in a warm home amidst a healthy family and step into the sunshine of a new day I am tempted to **denial** or at least ignoring the rest of reality.

You have shown up here today because you either hope or believe that there is an alternative to despair or denial.

And there is: Jesus said in John 11:25 "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies..."

That is an audacious claim.

 What he said is so counter-intuitive,
 so contrary to common sense,
 so different than everything our five senses tell us
 that either he lies and perpetuates a cruel fraud or
 he speaks the greatest truth with the most profound
 consequences every imagined.

We gather today to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

And His resurrection provides the credibility for his claim that he is our resurrection and life.

But if what we celebrate today is a charade, a wistful ideal, or a hollow dream – than we are fools.

But if what we celebrate today is a fact of history – then we have hope.

In 1914 Sir Ernest Shackleton attempted to lead a group of men to the Antarctica.

80 miles short of the destination the winter seas crushed their ship.

Leaving most of the men to attempt to survive on the south shore of Georgia Island, Shackleton and two others attempted the seemingly impossible winter crossing of the mountainous interior to reach a whaling village.

Every day, the man left in charge would require the men to pack up in anticipation of Shackleton's return to save them.

They waited for weeks with no knowledge of whether Shackleton even made it to the village.

In their slow starvation, the leader made his demand in an attempt to keep their hope alive.

That is the most common definition of hope – a strong desire with no reasonable assurance.

But when Jesus said, “He who believes in me will live, even though he dies”, **he was basing his bold claim on his own resurrection.**

If Jesus, himself, did not rise from the dead than we have a hope less reasonable than Shackleton's men.

Someone might object that reality and resurrection are two different categories.

- Reality is concrete, objective, historical – it's real.
- Resurrection is abstract, subjective, metaphysical – it's religious.

But while the **meaning** of the resurrection may be a theological or metaphysical issue, the **fact** of the resurrection is an historical one.

**The claim of Jesus was that he would physically (not just mystically) come back to life after his death.
Either that happened or it didn't.**

The historical account is that he was a real person who actually died.
His body was placed in a real tomb hollowed from real rock.
Real soldiers guarded the tomb.
And three days later he was seen physically alive again.

In fact, in the next 40 days over 500 people saw him, talked with him, ate with him, touched him and confirmed, contrary to their own disbelief, that he was in fact alive again after his death.

Can you imagine any better way for the truth of the resurrection to be attested than the way God did it?

The witnesses knew him.
And these witnesses had nothing to gain and everything to lose by lying.

If beauty of language or eloquence of speech were required to convince anyone of the resurrection of Jesus, then surely God would have called angels to declare the resurrection.

But instead, he called mostly no-name, simple, working-class people not to eloquence but simply to testify, to bear witness to what they saw, touched and heard.

The historical record is that Jesus rose from the dead.

Now what do we do with that?

You can either deny it or you can believe it or maybe there is a third option, you can ignore it.

Most of us in church on an Easter Sunday **won't deny** the resurrection.

Which means that most of us believe it.

But then we must understand that believing in the resurrection of Jesus means that despair and denial are not logical responses to the realities of life.

If Jesus rose from the dead then his credibility is so rock-solid that to do anything other than believe him is illogical to the point of being foolhardy.

He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”

That provides a different kind of hope – not wishful thinking but confidence in a proven Savior.

I must confess how contradictory it is to hear people say they believe in God but then notice that it has virtually no bearing on how they live their lives.

A New York fireman was being interviewed Friday on NPR as he was standing at “ground zero” of the World Trade Center.

His comment was that he was praying for the yet unrecovered body of his son but he quickly added, “But mind you I’m not a religious person, I’m not a religious person.”

According to any dictionary that is a logical contradiction.

Even if you are so postmodern that you don’t care that it is a contradiction, at least you have to admit it is a logical contradiction.

If you believe Jesus rose from the dead then that contradicts despair or denial.

If you believe Jesus rose from the dead then our hope is not wistful like Shackleton’s men’s but **our hope is real.**

We face the realities of the world in which we live not with despair or denial but with a risen living God who promises real physical life even though we die.

The Good News is simple.

Our tendency is to make it more sophisticated.

The cultured sages of every era seem to want to add to the simple truth a mist of human thought and speculation.

But the Gospel is built on three plain facts of history:

Jesus was born, he died, and he rose again.

Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:3,4 “I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Or put even more simply, to Timothy Paul said, I Timothy 2:8 “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.”

The basis of our hope for a future is not our right living.

Neither is the basis of our hope for a future found in our faith.

The foundation of our hope is the resurrection of Jesus!

This is not a memorial service.

We are celebrating the presence of the resurrected Lord.

We don't just sit today and remember, we engage him here and now.

He is alive and he is here.

He is presently interceding for us

(Romans 8:34 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.”)

He is presently overseeing all things on our behalf.

(Romans 8:28 “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

He is here seeking our fellowship.

John 15:9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Now remain in my love.

He is presently claiming eternity for us

(John 14:1 “I go to prepare a place for you”)

We do not treat Jesus as a phantom or an ideal, but we treat him as a living person – to be sure, the living person of God – but a person with whom we talk and in whom we trust and love.

John 11:25 "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

I end this message with a reading of the Gospel compiled from the four written witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

Hear these witnesses to the greatest event in human history and ask yourself

“What is the proper response in the midst of the realities of life is it despair, denial or hope?”

“Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action (to crucify Jesus). He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was (Friday) Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on (Saturday) the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

On (Sunday) the first day of the week, there was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

And very early in the morning, the women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others) took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them,

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words.

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.

And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Faced with the realities of life we can choose despair, denial or hope – Which are you choosing?

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

Are you trusting him?