

Help for the Hopeless

This past week I read these words: “We can live forty days without food, eight days without water, four minutes without air, but only a few seconds without hope.” How many of you have experienced a sense of hopelessness in the last year? You are not alone. Many counselors are concerned about a crisis of hope in our culture. In the book “Hope in the Age of Anxiety” the authors describe nine ways in which hopelessness affects us.

1. Alienated -cut loose, no longer deemed worthy of love, care, or support, fearing further pain and rejection
2. Forsaken – abandoned and alone in the time of greatest need
3. Uninspired – no role models or hero figures to which one can aspire
4. Powerless – unable to attain life goals
5. Oppressed – feeling crushed by circumstances overwhelmed
6. Limited – deficient, not having what it takes to make it in this world
7. Doomed – trapped in an irreversible decline
8. Captive – trapped by circumstances or relationships
9. Helpless – exposed and vulnerable, unsafe and at risk in the world

This crisis of hope affects our health, our emotional stability, our relationships and our spiritual life. It influences life in our homes, at work, in our friendships, neighborhoods and even in the church. What makes our lack of hope a crisis is that many of those resources in which we have placed our hope in the past have failed us. We placed our hope in our finances and investments and are forced to face the collapse of banks and a market crash. We placed our hope in retirement accounts and social security and now realize we will have to work longer and be less secure. We placed our hope in the stability of our nation and now fear the national debt and solvency. We placed our hope in our unity but now are experiencing division and the polarization of our entire culture. We placed our hope in our strength and security but are now forced to live with the uncertainty of school shootings, violence, terrorism, and global annihilation. We placed our hope in the strength of our culture, but now live with the reality of moral collapse, family fragmentation and child abuse. We placed our hope in our health but deal with the nearly constant news of those we love facing cancer, birth defects or infertility. We placed our hope in our own ability and strength and find ourselves overwhelmed and fearful. The

hopelessness is apparent as suicide rates in a variety of population segments continue to grow each year. Is it any wonder you have experienced some sense of hopelessness?

That sense of hopelessness is not new. In fact, the Easter Gospel begins with people who are equally lost in that fog of hopelessness and despair. Mary Magdalene saw only a tomb that had been robbed and the body of Jesus stolen by a gardener. Most of the disciples are hiding, afraid they too will end up like Jesus, crucified and buried. Only Peter and John go to check out Mary's story. In John's Gospel they get credit for believing but notice they don't stay very long but simply returned home. The hopelessness of Mary's grief prevents her from understanding the message of the angels and from initially recognizing Jesus.

While I chose John's Gospel for Easter I was drawn to Matthew's account as well. He writes, "Suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it." How many here have experienced an earthquake? There have been more than a few of those all over the world this past year. I have experienced several while serving in southern California. One occurred on a Sunday morning during worship. I remember the huge cross shaking up front and preparing to dive under the altar and then it was over. They don't call an earthquake a shaker for nothing. It rocks your world. Matthew is saying that Easter is an earthquake that shook the whole world. We who are in the death grip of all the facts of life that bind us to hopelessness are suddenly shaken by the jolt of Easter morning. The resurrection is not a theological concept, it is an experience. It is the experience of a God who creates a way when there is no way, a God who makes war on evil until evil is undone, a God who raises Jesus to demonstrate the power of His love and His unparalleled sovereignty. Many people spend their time trying to explain the resurrection, but the greater truth is that the resurrection explains us. Easter affirms what Jesus proclaimed that we are never-ceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in the fullness of The Kingdom of God. It proclaims that we are loved by Jesus with a love that nothing in this life including death can stop. The death and resurrection of Jesus together is the single most powerful act of love Jesus offers us. On the cross, the world did all it could do to Jesus. At Easter God did all God could do for the world, and the earth shook! The resurrection of Jesus breaks through every layer of hopelessness that binds us and replaces it with the most powerful and profound hope available.

In many ways the disciples should have expected it. Throughout his ministry Jesus shook up people with his love. All of his miracles and healing were meant to call attention to how much God loves us. Jesus' love startled the world by reaching out to lepers, healing their disease ridden bodies, restoring their dignity and returning them to their families and community. Jesus' love shook the cultural conventions when he asked the Samaritan woman for drink and gave her the chance to face her past without rejection, restoring her sense of worth, equipping her to be a vital witness. Jesus love rocked the world when he confronted the self-righteousness of religious

leaders when he took the side of the woman caught in adultery offering her forgiveness instead of shame and certain death. His love rescued her and restored her life. Even the cross did not stop his love. Imagine how Jesus must have startled the hopeless Roman soldier, the one who had mocked, tortured and drove the nails into his hands and feet, when Jesus said, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Imagine the shock to the hopeless thief on the cross next to Jesus after a lifetime of deception and sinful choices to hear Jesus words of acceptance and promise of life with Him: "Today you will be with me in paradise." Imagine Jesus words to his hopeless and grief stricken mother as she stood at the foot of the cross and she hears Jesus startling words of care for her future, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to John he said, "Here is your mother." You may be here today bound up by hopelessness having similar needs of forgiveness, acceptance and support. Don't leave here today without experiencing His earthshaking love. You are here today because Jesus wants to meet those needs and give you hope. Paul writes in Romans 5:5, "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us. Easter is the epicenter for our faith, hope and love. Easter is why we worship on Sunday, the first day of the week when they went to the tomb and experienced the resurrected Lord, Jesus. Easter is the center of the our life together in the Church year and that reminds us that the experience of Easter must also be at the center of our individual lives as well. Listen to some other words in the New Testament about that hope. Rom 8:24, "For in this hope we were saved..." Rom 15:4, "For everything that was written in the past was to teach us that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." 1 Corinthians 15:19, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people." 2 Corinthians 3:12, "Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. Colossians 1:5, "...faith and love spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you." Eph 1:18, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you... the great power for us who believe, power which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms." Search the scriptures you will find even more. That is the hope available to us through faith in Jesus. Of all people in the world, Christians should be the most hope filled. Christian Churches should be the beacons of hope for every community.

Having hope is not the end but the beginning. We have not simply been called to get our dose of hope and leave. We have been called to something more. The world I described to you at the beginning of this sermon is in desperate need of hope that can only come through the earth-shaking love of Jesus. Within the span of our worship today, in the United States alone, 150 people will be diagnosed with cancer, 64 will die from cancer, 10 will die from alcohol abuse, 2 more will die of aids, 2 more from drug over doses, 3 will die of suicide, and 5 more from traffic accidents. But the question is would we know how to share the compassionate love of Jesus to

friends or family touched by these painful circumstances? What would you say to a family member who has just been diagnosed with cancer or to a parent whose son or daughter has been given only months to live? As I have been facing my father's cancer I have wrestled with the scripture that says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks...for the hope that you have." 1Peter 3:15

I have thought about it even more after seeing a private screening of a movie that is coming out on April 9th, it's called "Letters to God." It is a true story about a boy named Tyler and his struggle with cancer. While his family struggles to accept his diagnosis, hope is inspired through his letters to God! In this short clip, Tyler's mother is struggling with the overwhelming pain of her son's impending death. Let's watch as Maddie shares a difficult truth with her own mother. Maddie knows the right Bible verses but she needs something more. Watch and think about what you might say to this grief-stricken mom.

(Letters to God movie clip)

When people are struggling what do they need? If it's not enough just to give them Bible verses, then what does it look like to care? Paul reminds us that we are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2Corinthians 5:20) We gather together today not only to hear the proclamation of our reason for hope but to be the Easter presence of Jesus out there in our world. We gather together to commit ourselves to be a community of hope, a place where people can receive the earth-shaking love of Jesus in his forgiveness, acceptance and support and become transformed people through faith in Jesus, filled with Hope.

Whether we encounter a friend who is experiencing sickness or dealing with the death of a loved one, a family member who is making destructive choices, or someone who is simply feeling alone, each of us has the privilege to offer Jesus startling love. And after each encounter with Jesus who lives inside us, people's lives can be filled with new-found hope. Before you leave today, think of just one of those people in your life in need of forgiveness, acceptance and support. Let the Holy Spirit guide you to be an ambassador for Christ, letting His love come through you. Some may be thinking, how can I offer hope to others when I just got my first dose of hope today and I feel like I'm just getting by. Remember, any amount of hope in you that comes from Jesus will do, because we are not asking people to put their hope in us, but in Jesus. We are all imperfect messengers, but for those who are hurting and hopeless that is better than no messengers at all! Martin Luther once spent three days in a black depression over something that had gone wrong. On the third day his wife, Katie came downstairs dressed in mourning clothes. "Who's dead?" Luther asked her. "God," replied Katie. Luther rebuked her, saying, "What do you mean, God is dead? God cannot die." "Well," she replied, "the way you've been acting I was sure He had!"

Let me show you a final clip from the movie, Letters to God. Tyler, an eight year old cancer patient is an ambassador for Jesus. In spite of his tremendous personal pain, even as he struggles with his own mortality, Tyler is on a mission from God – he is thinking about others around him and their need of Christ. Tyler’s letter to God are the his prayers, instead of just praying them he writes them out and sends them to God. His letter carrier tries to pawn the letters off on his boss and a pastor but they both encourage him to hold on to the letters as he gets to know Tyler. Finally, Brady, the postal worker feels compelled to read them. He is transformed by Tyler’s faith in the end delivers the letters to each of the people Tyler is praying for even in the midst of his cancer.

(Letters to God movie clip)

As I watched this movie I couldn’t help but reflect that as Tyler was dealing with his cancer and the meaning and purpose of his life, he wasn’t concerned with his financial security, retirement account, his career, nor anything else in which we can easily misplace our hope. His hope was clearly focused on his relationship with Jesus and those in his life he was called to love and care for. His hope was in the eternal life he was already living in Jesus! His focus was on Easter. In the midst of what many would call hopeless, Tyler was certain and looking forward with eagerness to the earth-shaking, love of Jesus in his own resurrection. This power is unleashed in Tyler’s life as it must also be in our own.

Today Jesus wants to rock our world again with his life giving and life transforming love in the Easter message. He wants to fill your heart with hope, hope grounded in what He has done. He wants to equip you to be his ambassador of hope in the world, in your home, where you work among your friends and in this community. I pray you will take the most profound meaning of Easter with you and pass it on. This is the reason for the hope we have in us!

Christ is Risen.

He is Risen Indeed.

Paul Azinger was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 33. He was a 10-time winner on the PGA tour. Paul says, “A genuine fear came over me. I could die of cancer. Then another reality hit me even harder. I am going to die eventually anyway, whether from cancer of something else. It’s

just a question of when. Everything I had accomplished in gold became meaningless to me. All I wanted to do was live.” Then he remembered what Larry Moody, the PGA Bible study teacher said to him, “Zinger, we’re not in the land of the living going into the land of the dying. This is the land of the dying and we’re going to the land of the living.”

Paul Azinger recovered from cancer. He continues to grow as a disciple of Jesus and he reminds his fellow players of the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus and that God will do almost anything to get you to heaven, but He won’t force His will on you. The decision is yours.