

WHEN WE KEEP STRIKING OUT

A Sermon for Easter
Luke 24:13-32 – Topic: The Resurrection

Welcome to the strangest Easter of our lives. It has been a difficult time, hasn't it? There are at last some encouraging signs that are helpful, but the numbers are still stark and heartbreaking. Half a million cases of COVID-19 in our country with 20,000 dead to date and we are far from done. The end is not in sight yet. It strains our ability to hope. Hopeless is an unpleasant place to be. In our lives together there have been many times where I am looking for something in our house and can't find it. I'll ask Laurie where it is. She will say, "Try looking in this closet." I look. I search thoroughly, obsessively, but it's not there. I search every place I could imagine the thing being, and fail totally. I end up saying, "This is hopeless. That thing is gone. It is not here." Then Laurie says, "Let me look." She goes to a place I've already eliminated because I looked there and struck out, and she finds the missing item. That has happened regularly in our house, which leads me to conclude what is hopeless is not the situation, but Laurie's husband.

The hopeless situation is a theme in movies. Sylvester Stallone made an entire franchise out of the fictional story of a lousy, down-on-his-luck boxer named Rocky Balboa, who through fortuitous events is given the "opportunity" to fight world champion Apollo Creed. The odds are long that he'll even make it through the first round. His situation was hopeless.

It's inspiring to see or hear stories of people facing impossible odds and overcoming them. But the truth about hopeless situations is, they're hopeless. We like movies about overcoming hopeless odds because at some deep level we all feel like we face them in our lives in some ways. Today I want to tell you about a hopeless situation that was overcome against all odds. It is a story that can and will change our lives, for all of us face at least one hopeless situation, and likely more in our lives. Let's look at Luke 24:13-32.

THE TWO DISCIPLES WERE DEPRESSED

This event took place on the very first Easter Sunday. It involves two brokenhearted followers of Jesus who had been in Jerusalem for the Passover. The Sabbath is over, as is the great feast, so these two are leaving the city to go back to their home village, a place called Emmaus. This was a village about 7 miles outside of the city. We don't know today exactly where it was because it was not a major site for anything and doesn't exist today.

We only know the name of one of these two people. One of them was named Cleopas. There are a couple of things here that tell us this story was not a legend or myth made up centuries after the fact. It was an account Luke got through an interview with eye witnesses, likely one

of the original disciples. First, consider the name Cleopas. If you were making up a story it is highly unlikely you would choose Cleopas for one of the two disciples. Do you know who Cleopas was? No? I don't either. No one does. No other important person in the Bible or in history had that name. If you were making up a story and wanted to make it seem important you would choose a recognizable name to lend it credence. That didn't happen here.

Then there's the matter of the missing name of the other disciple. Why would Luke give us one unrecognizable name and not the other? It's because he didn't know the other person's name. If this was just a made up story the originator of the story would have made up names for both of the disciples. What happened here was the person who told Luke this story could remember the name of Cleopas, but said, "he was with another guy, but I can't remember that guy's name."

How likely is it that a witness to the events couldn't remember a name? Luke did his research 20 years or more after those events happened. Remember that Jesus had hundreds of followers. Even the leaders of the movement would not have personally known all of them well, so it's not surprising that he would not remember a name of one of them who hadn't played a central role in the church.

Nearly 20 years ago there was a couple who were a part of the church I was serving at that time and who had an experience that was unique in all my years of ministry. They had a very expensive car, and one Sunday morning their car was stolen right out of the church parking lot during our worship service! These people were part of our church. I knew them. But today I can't tell you what their names were. I remember their car. They had a Hummer. But I don't recall their names. The fact that I can't recall their names does not call into question the trustworthiness of my claim that the event actually happened. That's kind of the nature of human memory. We remember some details of something that happened 20 years or more in the past, but not all of them.

Verse 14 tells us Cleopas and his friend, we'll call that person Disciple Doe, were commiserating about the terrible events of the previous couple of days. As they were talking they were joined by another traveler. Only this traveler was the risen Jesus! The weird thing about this story is that they didn't recognize him. Why could they not recognize Jesus? That's just weird. What was going on here?

The accounts in the Bible go to some lengths to make it clear that people didn't just have visions of Jesus and this risen Jesus wasn't just some sort of spirit. The accounts insist that Jesus Christ physically was made alive again. His actual body could be touched, fed and recognized. It even had scars from his torture and execution. But according to the New Testament it was a new, improved human body with some advanced features that the old

model like the one we have, does not have. He was able to somehow show up in a locked room without using a door. And no, he didn't climb in through the window. He was able to disappear the same way he came. He was able to seemingly levitate, just rise up into the clouds. And apparently he was able to somehow keep people from recognizing him, and then in an instant turn off that cloaking device so they saw who he was.

Oh, come on, this is ridiculous. You can't possibly believe such a fantastic story. This is like something out of a fantasy movie. Well, yes, but you have to ask, assuming for the sake of argument that it did happen, why would Jesus want to keep people from recognizing him for a time like he supposedly did here? This is just my guess, but I think he wanted to drive home to those two disciples but even more, to future generations of believers like us, the mental and emotional state of these two men. They represent the mindset of all those who had been following Jesus prior to his execution. The last thing they expected to see was Jesus alive again. That idea never even entered into their minds. Such a thing was literally inconceivable to them. By having the conversation that he did with these two before they saw who he really was he was able to bring out the fact that they thought it was all over. Jesus was dead and that was the end of a truly tragic story. Nothing could be done about it.

If Jesus did defeat death and thus prove that he was who he claimed, God in human form, is it hard to believe he would be able to do some other things humans normally can't do? If he'd just been killed then come back to life, keeping a couple of guys from recognizing him is no big deal.

THE TWO DISCIPLES THOUGHT THERE WAS NO HOPE

When this person joined them on their journey and asked what they were talking about, Luke tells us in verse 17, they stood still, their faces downcast. The term he used speaks of being defeated, hopeless and emotionally crushed. They were also a bit incredulous that this guy had to ask. Cleopas asked this new person, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" Jesus and what happened to him was *the* topic of conversation in Jerusalem. It was far and away the most newsworthy event of those days. Cleopas could not believe that this guy could have been in Jerusalem and not been caught up in all that had just happened, because everyone else was.

For that person not to know what had happened would be like if you were out for a walk and one of your neighbors stopped you and said, "Hey, I've been noticing it seems like everybody is staying home. It looks like no one is going to work. Then I went to the grocery store and everybody's wearing masks. What is that about? And why is there no toilet paper in the stores?" You'd be incredulous. "Are you kidding me? You don't know what's going on? You don't know about the Coronavirus?" And he says, "Wait, there's a virus in Corona

beer?” As Cleopas and Doe saw it, you’d have to be that clueless to not be totally aware of what had happened to Jesus two days earlier.

But this stranger appeared to be that clueless, so they told him all about Jesus. They probably felt pretty stupid about this conversation later. They were telling Jesus all about what had happened to Jesus! They told him Jesus was a prophet, powerful in his teaching and his miracles. But the leaders of the nation handed him over to the Romans to be killed. The disciples thought he was going to be the king, the Messiah who would usher in an age of unprecedented glory and abundance for Israel. But it turned out that they were mistaken, because he died and now it was all over.

This was crushing at a level it is hard for us to even imagine. You get another glimpse of how crushing it was in verses 22-24. Some of the women in the Jesus movement that very morning had astounded them with wild tales of Jesus’ tomb being empty and of angels appearing to them saying he was alive. Some of the men in the movement had investigated and found out the tomb indeed was empty, but there was no sign of Jesus being alive. Of course there wasn’t, because such a thing would be impossible.

For these two people the idea of Jesus coming back to life never once entered their mind. They would never have imagined such a thing. It was a young wives tale, a fairy tale. Those reports just added more wounds to their pain and disappointment.

THE TWO DISCIPLES WERE THRILLED

When they finished their account, Jesus responded saying, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken.” No doubt that totally shocked Cleopas and Doe. This man went from not knowing anything about what had happened to telling them that all of this was exactly what was supposed to happen, what the prophets had said would happen. They should have known this was going to happen and been confident all along even though it was hard; it was following the plan. Jesus had repeatedly told his followers what was coming, that it was the very point of his coming into the world. But they somehow didn’t hear it.

They were totally convinced and focused on the idea that Jesus was going to be a conquering hero that would free them from Roman rule and make Israel the world’s superpower. They were so obsessed with that idea that they filtered everything Jesus said through that grid.

Have you ever dug for and found fossils that experts say are millions of years old? I have actually done that. When we were kids our dad took Jerry and me to a place called Shark Tooth’s Mountain, which is near Bakersfield. Dad brought along a large sieve he had made. He had us use our shovels to dig up some of the dirt and dump it into the sieve. When we

had quite a bit in the sieve we would pick it up and shake it back and forth. The dirt would fall through the bottom of the sieve but what would be left in it were rocks and very large teeth, clearly the teeth of sharks! You can find the teeth of Mako sharks, tiger sharks and many other species, some of which are extinct, there...in Bakersfield, which is 112 miles from the nearest ocean, with a mountain range in between. Somehow, at one point Bakersfield was under the ocean!

I want you to think of that sieve that we used. It filtered what fell through its grid. That's kind of what happened with most of Jesus' disciples. They loved who he was, what he said and what he did, but they had a rigid mental grid in place that served as a sieve. That sieve filtered out his repeated statements that he had come to give his life and that he was going to die. It filtered out the prophecies in the Old Testament that pointed out the same thing.

As Jesus talked, life began to return to those two disciples. They began to have hope. Could it be that this horrible disaster had been part of the plan all along? Was Jesus in fact the Messiah? Could there really be hope? They began to feel it. They said in verse 32 "were not our hearts burning within us as he talked with us?" That was an idiom close to our expression to "light a fire under" someone. It was like the pilot light on your furnace clicking then igniting and lighting up the whole furnace. That's what happened to them. Then, as they were eating a meal together Jesus opened their eyes so they could see who he really was. Instantly they knew it was all real. The women that morning were telling the truth. Jesus was alive, and he was much more than just a prophet or a king. He was the Lord of All in human form! They immediately headed back to Jerusalem to spread the news. Jesus is alive!

IMPLICATIONS

JESUS ' RESURRECTION IS A SHOCKING REALITY

This story reminds us that no one was hoping Jesus would come back to life. Jesus alluded several times to the fact that he would die and come back to life but always in figurative terms, so people missed it because their grid, their serve screened it out. Rising from the dead was inconceivable to them.

The point is no one in the early church was going to invent a story that Jesus was alive again. No one expected it. Even when they heard reports about it they didn't believe it. Ultimately even when they saw Jesus alive again with their own eyes the disciples thought they were seeing things. They simply didn't believe it could happen. *The resurrection of Jesus came as a total, unbelievable shock to all of his followers.*

This is important because it means they were not going to invent stories about Jesus rising from the grave. The idea was absurd to them. Dr. S. Joshua Swamidass has both a Ph.D. and an M.D. He is a professor of Laboratory and Genomic Medicine at Washington University in St. Louis, which is in the top ten of medical schools in the country. He recently wrote, “Without the physical resurrection, two thousand years of history are left begging for an explanation, like a movie missing a key scene. No other event in all recorded history has reached so far across national, ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, political and geographic borders. The message spread with unreasonable success across the world. During the first few centuries, it spread without political or military power, prevailing against the ruthless efforts of dedicated, organized and violent opposition. How did a small band of disempowered Jews in an occupied and insignificant territory of ancient Rome accomplish this unequalled act? What happened so many years ago that reframed all human history?” He goes on, “After Jesus’ violent death, his followers were frightened and scattered. Then, something happened that grew a strong, bold and confident belief that resisted sustained, murderous opposition...What changed them?” His conclusion is that only the dramatic resurrection of Jesus from the dead explains what happened.

In an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, George Weigel, author, political analyst, wrote, “There is no accounting for the rise of Christianity without weighing the revolutionary effect on those nobodies of what they called “the Resurrection...As (scholar) N. T. Wright makes clear, that first generation answered the question of why they were Christians with a straightforward answer: because Jesus was raised from the dead.” Weigel then goes on to point out how that totally changed human society forever.

You are likely listening to me today because you already believe Jesus did indeed defeat death. If you do not believe that, you had better have a cogent and reasonable explanation for what happened, and frankly, there isn’t one apart from his resurrection. At least not one that will stand up to analysis. If you do believe, be encouraged, for you have reason to do so. The message of this passage is that when all seemed lost, when no one had any hope at all, God accomplished a huge upset victory.

JESUS ‘RESURRECTION GIVES US HOPE

Hope that we are loved

Deep down inside of all of us there is a desperate desire to be loved, but with it a sense that we are undeserving of being loved. Colossians 1:16 says that we have been created by God and for him. We were created to live connected to God, loved by him. We are made for a relationship with him. But all of us have this sense that if people really knew the truth about us, about everything that is in us, they would not love us. And that goes infinitely more so when it comes to God.

I know you'll be shocked by this, but I think life is analogous to baseball. Baseball is a ridiculously difficult game because the central conflict of it involves an action that is the hardest single thing to do in all of sports. That is hitting a pitched, moving round ball with a round bat. Because that is such an absurdly hard thing to do, baseball involves a lot of failure. You probably know that if a major league hitter has a batting average of .300 or more, he will be a star. Last year, out of the hundreds who played in the majors, there were only 10 major leaguers who accomplished that. But batting .300 means a hitter is successful only 30% of the time. *He fails 70% of the time!* How many jobs are there where if you fail 70% of the time you're a roaring success? But actually the numbers are worse than that. The average in the major leagues involves around two swings per at-bat. That means major leaguers actually are failing on about half their swings, so when you think of how often the best are succeeding it works out to 15% of their swings. *So the best hitters are actually failing 85% of the time!* And these are the best at hitting in the whole world! Now here's where it gets real. Let's imagine that they change the rules of baseball. The new rule is you can only play if you bat 1.000, meaning you succeed every at bat. No, make it even more difficult. You have to succeed every time you swing the bat. How many baseball players would there be?

There would be zero. No one gets a hit every time they swing. No one can. Here's where the analogy applies to our lives. We all are having at-bats all day long every day of our lives. And all of us sense that in life to be truly good, to be truly worthy of love, of God's love, we need to succeed every time we swing the bat. And we know we don't. We don't even come close. We will never come close. Some of us might bat .400 and be way better than those of us who are below the Mendoza line, batting under .200. But that's a long way from never swinging and missing. What's really hard is if we truly understand the human heart we will know that no one bats .400, in fact, no one bats even .200. We are all batting a whopping .000, because everything we do is actually tainted by evil, even our best things.

That's why we all live with a background sense of not measuring up. It's because we don't measure up. People give us all sorts of suggestions for how we can alleviate that sense of inadequacy, failure and guilt. But none of them fix the problem. That's where the hope of the resurrection comes in. The resurrection means Jesus was, in fact, God in human form. He came because he loves us, and he came to make it possible through his work for us to be given grace, to be connected to Him, to live in his love, forgiven of our failures. We now can know that we are loved because God has said *Jesus is batting for us*. And he never swings and misses. What a relief to know that our failures, our shortcomings, our guilt, changes nothing. We are still loved. Without the resurrection none of that would be true. But because Jesus rose from the dead it is all true.

Paul told us in Romans 8:38-39 that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Yes, but I had an at bat today that was awful. I failed miserably. God looks at the score book and sees that you had a perfect day at the plate, you went 4 for 4, because Jesus was hitting for you.

Hope that our lives have meaning

There are many people in our society who care deeply about justice, about helping the poor, about alleviating hunger and disease and caring for the environment. Our four-year-old granddaughter, Ella, ends all her prayers with, “and justice for all.” But the worldview of so many in our culture actually undercuts all of that. That worldview assumes there is no God. There is no life after death. There is no absolute right and wrong. There is no judgment. There is just this life and when it ends your body rots, end of story. This all happened as a random accident.

The problem is accidents don’t have meaning. We have a kitchen faucet that is automatic. It has a sensor and if you just wave your hand in front of it you turn it on or off. Recently I was cleaning up the kitchen but in the process accidentally passed my hand in front of that sensor causing the faucet to turn on and water to come pouring out all over my arm. I quickly waved my hand to turn the water off. Then I stood there thinking about what had just happened. What was the significance of that water turning on and soaking my shirt on my arm? What was the point of this event? What did it mean? It meant I’m stupid. Yes, but surely there was some deeper meaning to this, something I’m supposed to learn.

Uh, no, other than don’t wave your hand in front of the sensor unless you want water to come out. This was an accident. Accidents don’t mean anything. There is no point to them. If our existence is an accident, merely a product of random events, then our existence doesn’t mean anything. I hear people saying all the time that they want to do something meaningful with their lives. Too bad. If this is true and we’re just an accident, nothing you do means anything. But I might help some people, maybe alleviate their suffering. So what? Why does that matter? If we’re all just an accident, it doesn’t matter. People want to talk about justice, but what is justice? It is the claim that there is a standard of what is right and wrong and what is fair and unfair, and people should be treated fairly. Uh, sorry accident, there is no standard. If there is no God, no life after this, no point to it all, no judgment that rights all wrongs, justice is a joke. It is just something you made up. That worldview destroys any sense of justice, doing what is right, sacrificing for others – because there’s no point to any of it.

But the resurrection means God is real, he’s there, he cares about us – enormously – and that there is right and wrong, there is life after death, and there is justice. It means that God cares about everything we are and do. Ken Shigematsu, a pastor up in Canada, says, “As strange as it may seem, if the resurrection actually happened, if God will one day renew this earth,

then every prayer, every act of love and kindness, every minute teaching a special needs child to read or walk, or listening to a lonely elderly person, every work of art or music inspired by the love of God, every act of care for the earth, will somehow find its way into the new creation that God will one day bring about. The smallest acts of kindness become infinite.” Every moment of our lives become infused with meaning. Life is going somewhere and we are not pointless.

Hope in every situation

If nothing else, the events we are experiencing right now remind us that we never know what is coming. Think back to our last big holiday, Christmas. Did you think at Christmas that all of our lives were going to be completely upended, thrown into confusion and turmoil, changed, maybe forever, by a virus from China? I can still hardly believe it. Did you ever think this would happen in your life?

We are right now in the middle of worldwide upheaval. And we don’t like it. We just want it to stop and go away. We long to hear that the worst is over and things will be getting better quickly, but we don’t know what’s going to happen.

Think about Cleopas and Doe. They had been through a day of horror, of suffering, pain, agony and loss as they watched their beloved Jesus be executed in the most vile, degrading and painful way possible. And now they’re in that period of doubt and confusion. They must have had it all wrong. Jesus must not have been who they thought he was. But how could he have been so good, so wise, so powerful, and end up like this? None of it made sense.

All of us are going to go through those Friday kind of days when there is pain and loss. Those days when you fear painful things that seem to lurk on the horizon, and then what happens is even worse. When the terrible things happen the doubt and the confusion ensues. Cleopas and Doe went through it. What they did not know was that as awful as the things that happened on Friday were, they were exactly what God wanted to happen and what they needed to happen. No one had any sense that this is exactly what God had planned. And not one single person imagined what God was about to do. When Jesus came back to life it proved that God has power over all foes, all obstacles. And that means there is always hope in every situation.

That’s what those disciples experienced. And that’s what we can experience. Jesus was dead. But now he is alive. That means that God is there, he is powerful and he is with us. Perhaps right now we are in that Friday and Saturday period of pain and confusion. But because Jesus rose from the dead, there is hope. God’s power is at work. This is no surprise to him, and he is working for our good.

This is crucial for us because of one of the most hopeless of all situations we face. The Coronavirus really levels the playing field. You could be rich, you could be famous, you could be powerful, and those things will not keep you from getting that disease. Though it strikes mainly at the sick and the elderly, we've now heard plenty of stories of young, vibrant, healthy people who have succumbed to it. It forces us to face our own mortality.

In a sense, all of life is in that period of confusion and doubt and fear, because we live in the shadow of death. Do you know what January 12 is? I didn't until just recently. It is James Bedford Day. Yes, I know, who's James Bedford? He was a psychology professor at UC Berkeley. He died on January 12, 1967. He died of metastatic kidney cancer. He was the first person ever to have his body frozen in the hope that it could later be thawed and reanimated when there was a cure for his condition. He set aside \$100,000 in his will to maintain his frozen body. That's the equivalent of more than \$780,000 today. But it wasn't enough. At one point his son got tired of the expense of the project so he put the body in a storage unit and kept it frozen with liquid nitrogen. The body is now at Alcor Life Extension Foundation. The point is that people don't want to die, but that we are in the hopeless situation where there is no way to defeat it.

But because Jesus rose from the dead we have the promise that there is hope even beyond the grave. In John 11:25 Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." In the most hopeless situation of all, we have hope.

In the ominous, tiresome, worrisome situation we are all in right now, there can be weariness, fear, confusion – for some even despair. We are in that Friday and Saturday period. But that does not mean it is hopeless. Jesus is alive. He has conquered death when all seemed lost. He has power today, even over this circumstance.

At the end of the classic novel *The Count Of Monte Cristo*, the main character, Edmond Dantes, writes a letter. He had been through a terrible Friday experience of betrayal, injustice, loss and pain. He had survived it and lived to seek revenge on those who had hurt him. But in that process he came to see that he was trying to take God's place, and that resulted in innocent people being hurt. So the final line of his letter and of the book is, "So, do live and be happy, children dear to my heart, and never forget that, until that day when God deigns to unveil the future to mankind, all human wisdom is contained in these two words: 'wait' and 'hope'!" Because Jesus rose from the dead, in these moments when we are in the confusion of a very hard time, we can wait and hope, and we can do so with confidence, patience, endurance and joy.