

Jesus is the Hope of Easter

Celebrating Easter in the early church was a bit different than how we do it today. For the first 300 years Christians were regarded as outcast, who were regularly arrested, jailed, beaten or killed depending on the mood of an angry crowd. To be honest there were no chocolate eggs to go round!

Christians were martyred, some were thrown to lions in the Coliseum, others were used for Gladiator practices and some were put on display by being crucified upside down. To make the necessary example, the church leaders were typically chosen first for cruel death. But to a surprised Roman authority the lines of the willing just kept growing. In fact the numbers were so great that church leaders had to forbid voluntary martyrdom. Let's face it the Christians of the early church were made of tougher stuff.

The 1st Century Christian church stood strong in the face of agonizing torture and boldly stared it down. The early church were audacious, brave and possessed by a divine hope, a confident expectation.

To 21st Century Christians we are slightly confounded and baffled. Voluntary martyrdom vs. Easter eggs – give us the chocolate! It is staggering to believe. But there is a powerful lesson we can learn from early church history. Why were they willing to die for what they believed? The answer is staggering.

They were willing to die for what they believed because they were first willing to live for what they believed. For the early church this hope wasn't just some religious code. Christianity to them was not a set of ideals and philosophies. Their secret was not based upon a moral code of behaviour. Their hope was more than all of that. A hope that possessed them to the point they were willing to die.

Their hope was a solid, pure and genuine hope that they experienced day by day. It was a hope that became a living, transforming and compelling relationship with Jesus Christ who they believed died for them on the cross and on the 3rd day raised again to new life! Their hope was an empty tomb.

Romans 15: 13 says it this way, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

These early Christians literally overflowed with a divine and supernatural hope based on their living relationship with Jesus Christ. The God of hope filled them with both joy and peace and they radiated an inspiring hope to the world around them.

These early Christians realised that Easter points them beyond the horror and awfulness of the Cross to the hope of an empty tomb. Easter tells us that Jesus did not remain in the tomb but was raised to new life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Easter tells us that there is hope for eternal life because Jesus Christ conquered death. Easter tells us that God has triumphed over evil, sin and hell. This is our hope and it can be your hope as well. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead!

Listen to the words of the Angel recorded in **Matthew 28: 5 – 6**, "The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay." With this hope from the empty tomb set firmly in their hearts and lives the early church turned the known world upside down in a little over 300 years!!

This hope of the church was a real and tangible experience. Paul, an early church leader and author of most of the New Testament is recorded as writing.

Romans 8: 10 – 11, “But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to (or quicken) your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.”

The early church, like us today, experienced a “quickenings” or a jolt of Christ resurrected Spirit. This was an experience of the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from death also touching their lives. It was a giving of life, new life, from Him who had raised Jesus from the dead.

2 Corinthians 5:17 declares, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” The early church’s experience of new life happened as they received the message of Christ, praying and receiving Christ as Lord of their lives. They received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And that changed everything!

The reason they were willing to die for Christ was because they were willing to live for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. They had experienced new life in Christ. They had received a passion to serve Jesus. They had experienced forgiveness of sin. They had received mercy, kindness and grace. They had received hope. They believed in the hope of the world Jesus Christ.

This knowledge and powerful experience changed everything for them. In turn they were willing to live out that hope. It was the very simplicity of their hope that motivated them to go into all the world and preach Jesus. There are a few great lessons we can learn as we look back 2,000 years.

1. Has the power of Jesus so gripped your life that you are willing to live fully all you believe?

It seems fanatical at times to us in the 21st Century western world. But listen to how their hopes and beliefs changed the way these people lived. Through the lives of the early Christians the world witnessed a group who of people who;

- Elevated the role of women in the culture
- Put value on children including valuing female children as much as males
- Refusing to have abortions simply as a birth control measure
- They lived lives of sexual purity rejecting immorality and sexual promiscuity
- Men loving and caring for their wives and not pursuing sex outside of marriage
- These people experienced visible joy even in the midst of incredible persecution
- These churches were committed to helping the poor and needy, reaching out to the most vulnerable who included the physically and mentally disabled.
- They cared for widows and orphans
- The members of their churches on hearing of a disease outbreak would literally run to offer compassion and care to the dying even dying themselves from the disease they were combating

Not only this, but the church moved powerfully in signs and wonders. People were healed from sickness and disease, those who were lame walked, and those who were blind had their sight restored. Those who were afflicted by evil spirits were released from the oppression. They were a people who believed in the power of prayer and regularly saw God move on their behalf. There were unexplainable miracles that took place that amazed the world.

It seems a bit fanatical to us today but the church of the 1st century was a dynamic church, a church full of awe and wonder. And people heard the message, witnessed the lives of those who believed and responded in their hundreds and thousands. The early church grew fast!

It was these people who had turned the world upside down built churches that inspired passion, commitment and produced people willing to not only live for their hope but to die for it as well. Do we seek to live like this?

2. **Why do we hesitate to share the power of Easter with others?** Why are we embarrassed or intimidated by the world when it comes to sharing about our hope in God?

1 Peter 1: 3 says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Peter says we've been given "new birth" into a "living hope" based upon "the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." This is the Easter message. This is the Easter hope. This is the Easter miracle that transforms us, energises us and motivates us. It's real, potent and undeniable.

This is how we should live. This is how we take our beliefs and live them out in our western 21st Century world. This is the call to the 21st Century church today! Live in the hope of the resurrection! Be willing to give others a great response concerning the hope within us!

1 Peter 3:15 says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

The bible says to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have.

Bible hope is a confident expectation of good for the future. It is a future and a hope. A promise for a better tomorrow. It's the promise of a new day dawning. Hope in the midst of hopelessness makes us dealers in hope, inspirers of hope and restorers of hope. We know there is life beyond the grave. We have this glorious and eternal hope that death has been overcome by Jesus. People need to hear this powerful message.

Billy Graham once said, "Our world today so desperately hungers for hope, yet uncounted people have almost given up. There is despair and hopelessness on every hand. Let us be faithful in proclaiming the hope that is in Jesus." Are we dealers of hope, do we inspire hope in others – have we become restorers of hope in world so darkened by despair?

3. **Never underestimate what God is able to do!** Again in the west and in the 21st century we shy away from hype and hyperbole. We don't want to be thought of or associated with any cult like behaviour. I understand a need for a sane, rational and healthy belief system. But there must always be a place for hope without it sounding like hype.

In our Hope Initiative devotions **Dr Phil wrote** about the difference between hope and hype. In his devotional he said, "*Hype is defined as "extravagant or intensive publicity or promotion"; it is "often exaggerating the benefits". Hype is more sparkle than substance. It is all fizz and froth, but with no foundation. We worry that if we raise expectation too much, we end with an exaggerated, unreasonable idea of what is possible or achievable. If we consider this more closely though, it is almost impossible to apply the word "hype" to true Biblical hope.*"

Why?? A key aspect of hype is exaggeration – overstating the impact, significance or benefit of the source. But can we really overstate true biblical hope? Listen to this passage of scripture.

Ephesians 3: 20 from the Passion Translation; “Never doubt God’s mighty power to work in you and accomplish all this. He will achieve infinitely more than your greatest request, your most unbelievable dream, and exceed your wildest imagination! He will outdo them all, for his miraculous power constantly energizes you.”

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In the NIV translation it states “God is able to do.”

To quote **Dr Phil** again, *“If that’s true, is it not impossible then to overstate or exaggerate what God can do? We cannot “hype” God, because everything we ask or imagine Him to be capable of falls way short of what He can actually do.”*

It was this kind of hope that turned the known world upside down. It was this kind of hope that inspire people to be willing to not only die for their faith in Christ but live extravagante lives of love, grace and kindness. Hope was the thing that motivated them, inspired them and moved them to live with compassion and mercy.

This hope also has a name – His name is Jesus. This Jesus is God’s Son who left heaven’s glory, beauty and holiness to come to our dark, dusty and dirty world to show us what God is like. Jesus is the main character of Easter and it was His work on the cross and His resurrection that makes Easter such a powerful moment in history! All over the world Christians are celebrating the hope and possibilities of the Easter message.

Jesus moved with compassion. Jesus spoke with authority. Jesus performed miracles healing the sick restoring people to wholeness. Jesus was both humble and bold. Never a man spoke like Jesus. People listened and followed Him.

Jesus as God’s Son knew His mission as well. As the main character of Easter Jesus became the Lamb of God He knew He would become the sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. He died for the sins of all the world. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us – such is the love and commitment to the mission. This was the motivation of the believers in the 1st Century church too.

Jesus said in **John 3: 16 - 17**, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”