

Promises You Can Count On

Mark 16: 1 - 8

Pastor HeyYoung came over to the church the other day with an envelope for me. It had been delivered to her home, with my name on it. Now, this is a rather frequent occurrence in that Dianna and I lived at 503 Kings Highway for ten years, and it is taking the rest of the world a long time to catch up to the fact that we're not there anymore ... anyway, in this envelope was actually a pre-approved Discover card, with a ridiculous \$12,000 credit limit.

Now, I shared with you last November that Dianna and I only have one credit card, and we haven't carried a balance on it in over 20 years, so, needless to say, we didn't apply for this card! Our feeling is that if we can't afford to pay for something by the end of a month, we don't really need it. (Our card is for convenience, and to collect those nice 'reward' checks twice a year!)

But here's this company, offering us a card, a means, that could quickly get us in debt over our heads, and whatever information they used to decide send it to us, is at least six years out of date – that's how long it's been since we lived at that address.

As I cut it up and disposed of it I was thinking, "Is it any mystery why our economy is so whacked out?" But then, as I went back to writing this sermon, I thought more about all the 'offers' and 'promises' that come to us in the course of a lifetime... and how many of them seem so attractive, but they also have hidden pitfalls, and snares, if they're not just flat-out lies.

Yet how easily we fall for those empty promises! From the very beginning, as Satan whispered to Eve in the Garden, "Is that what God *really* said?", and she and Adam looked at that fruit, longingly, they couldn't get past their 'eyes', and it became most important thing in the world to them. And that inability to delay gratification, the inability to trust that God knows what he's talking about when he says, "Some things are not what they may seem" led to a whole lot of trouble. To say the least!

Now I'm not comparing advertisers to Satan, and you I don't preach that having nice things, is bad...and this is not a sermon about economics anyway. But my point is that we are still hearing

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the same line – it comes at us constantly, from every direction: “You *need* this!” “Your life will be so much better... happier... more secure... fulfilled, if you would just *do this, get this, be this*.” “You deserve to let go once in a while”... “indulge yourself”...and we all fall for it. And we’re ultimately always disappointed, because these promises can’t deliver.

In Mathew 16:26, Jesus suggested that part of our lack of satisfaction in life, may well come from our looking in the wrong places for it. He asks a question: “*What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?*” In other words, if there’s nothing beyond this life, then this life becomes a meaningless exercise in futility. Because this world is going to let us down. No matter what it promises.

Is it really true that, in the end, the one with the most toys wins? Of course not. And we know that, but so many of us hedge our bets anyway, because, perhaps, we’re afraid we’ll miss out otherwise. What good is it if you climb the ladder of success and yet in the process of winning the game of life, you lose your soul? Jesus said that the things that are really important – in the end – are things that stand in stark opposition to the direction that most of our world is going. The upside-down Way that Jesus came teaching says there is more to life than this life. In fact, He teaches that real life is found when we die. (I don’t mean simply a physical death, either.)

Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

Did you know that this saying is found in the Gospels *five times*? Jesus talks about a living that is found in dieing... he talks about life emerging from death, victory from defeat, power from weakness. It’s a paradox.

Understanding that paradox is hard for us. And that’s not just because we are taught that life is life, but because society also reinforces the idea that death is death. Jesus actually describes death as a goal to pursue, but we see death as an enemy to avoid. We run from it. We don’t like to talk about it in any form. We don’t even like to say the word “death.” When someone dies, we say, “They’ve passed,” or “They’re no longer with us,” or “They’ve kicked the bucket,” “bought the farm,” or “pushing up daisies.” We don’t like the word “death.” It’s so final.

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We don't understand what Jesus was talking about. We don't want to die. We fear death. But it is inevitable. Unless Christ returns before our last breath, we are all heading in that direction. It's part of life.

So, let's talk about death. A lot of people believe that when we die, as Tony Campolo once said, we're buried and our relatives go to our home and eat potato salad and argue over who gets our coin collection. It's over! That's all she wrote! Some think that an afterlife is something conjured up by preachers to increase church attendance. Heaven is nothing more than wishful thinking—a fairy tale which is really just some eternal coping mechanism.

This is the way we tend to see things: life is life and death is death. But we are here today, celebrating in this service the fact that someone came on the scene 2,000 years ago and once again flipped things upside down. His name was Jesus.

Over the past seven weeks we've been looking at the last 24-hour period of Jesus' life in a series of studies called 24 Hours That Changed the World. We spent the last week here reenacting those same events through special services. And so, we've been reminded, we are remembering the story: Jesus was God in flesh. He fulfilled every Messianic prophecy written hundreds of years before his birth. He worked incredible miracles. He predicted that he would die on a cross for our sins. Through his trial, and events leading up to Good Friday, Jesus took upon himself the evil of this world. And get this: on several occasions he even predicted that he would come back to life three days later.

After a brutal execution, Jesus was dead and buried. It appeared once again that death would have the final word. How could it not? It looked like once again, a promise was made that was more than could be delivered. But Mark 16 records what happened, as Jesus' mother and a friend come to the tomb to finish the work of his burial:

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

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In their fright Luke says that the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the angel said to them,

*“Don't be alarmed, You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified.
He has risen! He is not here.”*

See, Jesus defeated the misconception that death is death. He conquered the grave. Because of Jesus, death doesn't win. That's what Easter is all about. Easter is the difference between life and death, and it all comes down to the Resurrection. So Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:14, *“If Christ has not been raised our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”* Jesus' Resurrection turns everything upside down.

Out of sheer hopelessness comes ultimate hope! Out of despair comes this word, “We have something to hang onto!” And this is a promise that is based on *God's* action in the past, as well as his eternal integrity. It is a promise that will endure. We now have hope, no matter what we are facing.

Adam Hamilton wrote this:

“Hope is the sense that things will work out, that despite difficult circumstances and painful situations that might lead to despair, something good is around the bend. It is something we cannot live without. Dr. Jerome Groopman, who holds a chair in medicine at Harvard, notes in his book *The Anatomy of Hope*, “Hope gives us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them. For all my patients, hope, true hope, has proved as important as any medication I might prescribe or any procedure I might perform.” This is what the story of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection brings to us (p. 130)” Hope...

Just look around – there is a lot of frightening stuff going on around us. A few years ago, *Time* magazine had a cover story about global warming with this headline: “Be Worried. Be Very Worried!” We have seen people reacting in irrational and frightening ways to the passage of the recent Health Care bill – to the point of people shooting into the homes of some legislators. Crazy!

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And, closer to home... we've been talking about Radical Hospitality for the past months, a way of visualizing Grace in action. *From God...through the Church... into the world.* And that emphasis has brought us face to face with a tremendous amount of suffering. And we're trying to do what we can to minister to those who are hurting both within this community and outside these walls.

I had someone comment to me last week (and I've heard this before) "I don't know how you do what you do", meaning, "How do you manage to muck about in so much suffering, sadness, grief, and not 'go under' yourself?"

Well, honestly, sometimes it is difficult. When you hear of marriages blowing apart, and there is no explanation as to why one person has made those choices... that's hard. Or, visiting a family with a loved one in the hospital, and they tell you that they have to make a decision to remove life support. Or someone gets a life altering diagnosis, and now they have to deal with it. I have more memories than I can bear at times of walking away from a graveside, a hospital bed, leaning back in my office chair and taking a deep breath after a particularly difficult counseling session... and thinking, "Just what have I offered here today?"

And the answer is always the same: HOPE.

I'm concerned about the things going on in the world. I read the paper every morning. I'm concerned about our environment, and terrorism, I'm certainly concerned about our economy, and I hurt for those who are truly struggling in this. I feel the pain of those who have to make sense of life after a brutal medical diagnosis, or to put the pieces back together after being shattered by the sinfulness of another person. I hurt with them, but more importantly, I know that Jesus does, too. And even more than *just* identifying with our pain, I carry with me the unchangeable fact that Jesus has conquered evil, he has conquered pain, and he has conquered death. The sting is gone!

None of these things can negate the fact that Jesus Christ has won! Jesus will have the final word in all things, and that gives us hope. Real hope! It gives us courage to face all the problems of the

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world. Frederick Buechner put it well: “Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.”

Do you hear that? “Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.”

Do you believe it?

Last year, on Easter Sunday 2009, our nation was reeling. The mortgage crisis was in full swing. The roller—coaster nature of Wall Street was making everyone sick to their stomach, still dropping! Long—trusted financial institutions were being shut down or bought out at an alarming rate. Unemployment rates, skyrocketing.

Sensing heavy hearts in his congregation that Easter, John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian in Menlo Park, California, and author of a number of best—selling Christian books, offered a powerful reminder about the hope of Easter—a reminder that would serve us well still here on Easter Sunday 2010. Ortberg said:

“I cannot think of an Easter in recent memory where there was a bigger need for hope, for something that would breathe life into the human spirit. A year ago, so many people ... felt like they were on pretty solid ground. [Now they] find themselves in circumstances they never would have predicted.

A lot of people ... are feeling anxious. They have pressures ... that they did not have [before]. They [regret] decisions they’ve made over this last year. They wonder where things will stand a year from now.

Nobody ever wants a season of hard times ... to come, but when they do, they have a way of making you ... ask, *What am I really counting on? Am I building my life on a foundation that’s solid enough that circumstances beyond my control cannot take it away?* That’s why I’ve been looking forward to Easter ... [a time when] we gather to remember the only hope capable of sustaining a human life through *everything*.

People have not gathered for the past 2,000 years to say, “The stock market has risen. It has risen indeed.” They have not gathered to say, “The dollar has risen. It has risen indeed.” Or, “the employment rate has risen.” Or, “the gross domestic product has risen.” Or, “General

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Motors has risen.” Or “the value of your 401(k) has risen.” Here’s the one hope that has held up human beings across every continent and culture for two millennia of difficult times of poverty, disease, pain, hardship, [and] death itself: “Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.”

Jesus stood by the graveside of a close friend – his name was Lazarus. And there before him was one of Lazarus’ sisters, a woman named Martha. Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered him, “*I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*” I’ve got this hope...somewhere. Kind of vague, though.

And Jesus then made an amazing promise: “*I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.*”

What a promise... but then he asks the most important question of all. The one that makes the difference between being ‘intellectually inclined’ toward something... and ‘willing to stake your life on it.’ The question that defines the difference between knowing about something and living in its reality:

Do you believe this?

*Do **you** believe this?*

It’s as valid a question today as it was back when Jesus had this conversation with Martha 2,000 years ago. Jesus’ promise of *life* – not just being alive, but Living, his promise of abundant life, eternal life, a life of hope that conquers anything this world can throw at us...depends on our willingness to trust him.

That’s what belief is. Not just words, not just dressing up and singing happy songs in a big celebration service. But trusting. Leaning on God. I’ve shared this illustration before, but it works. Here’s the difference: Imagine that you are really sick. And you go to the doctor and she prescribes for you something that is going to cure you. So, what do you do? Do you take that Rx home and put it on your night table? And then complain, “This doesn’t work! It’s bogus!”

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You might be totally convinced that this is the right Rx, and you might have a very high estimation of that doctor's ability, and wisdom – but until you take that script to your local Pharmacy, and until you follow it, and take that medication, *nothing* is going to change for you!"

When the New Testament writers, and when Jesus talks about *belief*, they are talking about receiving what he is offering us in the same way as we would follow through on a Rx. Deep trust that *acts* on what we've heard.

If we believe in him, we will follow him. I'm not suggesting that we will turn into cookie cutter, Christian robots, all looking and talking and thinking exactly the same way! But if we believe in his Resurrection, then all the rest of what Jesus did and said makes sense.

Because his Resurrection was the vindication of his teaching. It was vindication of his sacrifice for our sins. It was vindication of his position as God's anointed one, our Hope. So if we say, "I believe" and yet it doesn't affect the way we treat other people, and the way we use our gifts and funds, and how we respond to people who hurt us, and if it doesn't effect how we think about ourselves and doesn't change our value system, and on and on, then we probably don't really yet grasp the Biblical concept of 'belief'.

Did you know that the word "hope" is used 71 different times in the New Testament? Seventy-one times! But get this: only one time is it found before the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have hope because God promised it to us in Jesus Christ. And he proved that promise by the Resurrection.

And so we join with the voices of millions of believers across the face of the world, and across time, economies, languages, ages and all circumstances with the shout of certain hope:

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Hallelujah!