

## **Hope: Lost and Found**

by Jeff Strite

Luke 24:9-24:32

OPEN: Years ago the producers of Sesame Street faced a dilemma. Will Lee, the actor who played Mr. Hooper, passed away, and the producers were faced with how to communicate the concept of death to the 10 million children (most of whom are under 6 years of age) who watched the show.

Child psychologists suggested they NOT say, "Mr. Hooper got sick and died," because children get sick and they are not going to die.

And the psychologists suggested they NOT say, "Mr. Hooper got old and died," because little children think of their parents as being old.

And the staff of Sesame Street decided to avoid religious issues (it was on PBS, remember) and NOT say, "Mr. Hooper died and went to Heaven."

So the show's producers decided to say just a few basics: He's gone, he won't be back, and he'll be missed. And they decided to use Big Bird to gently set the matter before the children. The show was aired on Thanksgiving Day so parents could watch it with their children.

Big Bird came out and said he had a picture for Mr. Hooper and he couldn't wait to see him.

One of the cast said, "Big Bird, remember, we told you that Mr. Hooper died."

And Big Bird said, "Oh yeah, I forgot." Then he said, "Well, I'll give it to him when he comes back."

And one of the staff members put an arm around Big Bird and said, "Big Bird, Mr. Hooper isn't coming back."

"Why not," Big Bird asked innocently.

"Big Bird, when people die, they don't come back."

(Brian Jones - Standard Publishing Illustrations)

When people die... they don't come back.

Normally, that's how it works, and it bothers a lot of folks.

Sigmund Freud famously said: "And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably will ever be!"

Others have echoed that "truth".

Aristotle called death the thing to be feared most because "it appears to be the end of everything."

Jean-Paul Sartre asserted that death "removes all meaning from life."

And French philosopher Francois Rabelais (as he was dying) said: "I am going to the great Perhaps."

That brings us to our text for this morning.  
People have always struggled with the concept of death.  
I'm told someone did a survey and found that 1 out of every 1 persons... dies.  
Everybody dies.  
And they generally STAY that way.  
That's kinda how it works.

Now here we have 2 men walking from Jerusalem to their home town of Emmaus.  
They've seen the tragedy that took place in Jerusalem as it unfolded before their eyes. Jesus was arrested, tried, beaten, spat on, insulted, and ultimately they saw Him die a cruel death on a cross.  
But they'd also heard the women tell of finding the tomb empty and hearing angels say He'd risen from the dead.

You'd think they'd have been encouraged.  
You'd think they'd believe Jesus had risen from the dead  
But that's not what's happened.  
They can't seem to wrap their minds around this idea.

And, when you think about it, their reluctance kind of makes sense.  
After all, the dead don't come back.

Peter heard the same story they did and we're told he "got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, WONDERING to himself what had happened."

And when Mary Magdalene stood by the empty tomb (not knowing she was talking to angels) it says that the angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"  
And she replies "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him." John 20:13

It was a logical conclusion.  
The dead don't come back.  
Jesus had to have been moved by SOMEBODY!

And right now... that's the only thing these men on the road to Emmaus can imagine.  
Somebody has taken the body.  
And right now it's not just the tomb that empty... so are their hearts.

As they're walking home Luke tells us "their faces were downcast."  
(Speaking as if I were quoting them):

"Tell us all you want to about angels... we're not buying it!"

And then they encounter this stranger on the road.

He asks them what they've been talking about... and they tell Him the whole story. They tell Him all about Jesus – a powerful prophet who did many miracles. How He'd been arrested and crucified. About the women saying that the tomb was empty, and all about the story about the angels.

But then they say one of the saddest things:

"... we had hoped (repeat that) that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel..." Luke 24:21

"We had hoped ..."

What they were really saying was this

"We don't expect it now... but once we did. We had this thing called hope - but now... it's gone."

(Owen Bourgaize on sermoncentral.com)

Jesus HAD BEEN our hope.

But He's dead now.

He's been executed.

He's dead and the dead don't come back!!!

As Aristotle noted death is feared most because "it appears to be the end of everything."

People are afraid of death.

When Sesame Street was debating about how to tell children Mr. Hooper had died, their child psychologists suggested they NOT say, "Mr. Hooper got sick and died," because children get sick and they might be AFRAID they'd die.

And their psychologists suggested they NOT say, "Mr. Hooper got old and died," because little children might be AFRAID their parents would die because they were... old.

Sesame Street's experts wanted to protect the children from FEAR.

But they offered them NOTHING to deal with that fear.

"Big Bird... Mr. Hooper's not coming back, because the dead don't come back!"

Essentially they were saying "Honey, when you die they're going to put in you a 6 foot deep hole and cover you with dirt and that where you'll stay... forever. You're not coming back."

That's got to be REAL encouraging!

ILLUS: Back when I was a child I loved my grandfather. I loved him and he loved me and we almost built our lives around each other. But then, when I was 5 years old... granddad died. That's hard for a 5 year old to understand.

Now, back then they didn't do funerals like they do now. There was no "funeral home." They took the casket and they placed it in the living room right where the TV would be now. And family and friends came to the house and ate in the kitchen and dining room and shared memories of their dearly departed. And that casket stayed in the house for the next 24 to 48 hours.

Then they had the funeral service and took the casket out to the cemetery. And they didn't do burials then, like they do now.

Nowadays, we have AstroTurf that they place on ground all the way around the casket and it even covers the grave itself. They didn't do that back then. There was no AstroTurf. They had a stand they placed the casket on, but the grave was an open hole, six foot long and six foot deep.

And here I was, a 5 year old boy, looking down into the deep empty hold. And my mamma said I looked up at her and I asked "How's grandpa ever going to get out of that grave?"

(Long pause)

And you know what my mamma did?

She told me about Jesus!

She told me: "You don't have to worry about Grandpa coming out of that grave, because Jesus already has come out of the grave." And she told me about the hope we have in Christ.

This concept of a resurrection is built into our faith.

It's the very foundation of why we are Christians.

You take the Resurrection of Christ out of Christianity – and you got nothing!

Paul wrote: "... how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him - if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

(I Corinthians 15:12b-20)

Ah... that's just a bunch of religious stuff... that never happened.

Paul just made all that up because he just wanted to create a religion!

That never happened!

But Paul said “Yeah it did! And I KNOW He rose from the dead... because I saw Him. “...what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that HE APPEARED

- to Peter,
- and then to the Twelve.
- After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.
- Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,
- and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

(I Corinthians 15:3-8)

No... it's not made up.

It's the basis of who we are.

And it's driven home every time you see someone baptized into Christ.

When we baptize someone, we lower them into the water as if into a grave.

And we don't leave there... do we?

NO, of course we don't!

We lift them out of that watery grave as if they were being... resurrected.

In baptism God is not just promising us that our sins are buried in that watery grave, He's promising us that just as we've risen out of that water, we'll rise out of our earthly grave when Jesus comes again. Jesus will come, and give a mighty shout, and we'll pop out of that grave just as pretty as you please!

As Christians we believe that we will rise from the grave... because that's why Jesus came.

Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us “since the children have flesh and blood in common, He also shared in these, so that through His death He might destroy the one holding the power of death - that is, the Devil - and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the FEAR OF DEATH.” (HCSB)

ILLUS: A couple of months ago, you folks sent me to Israel. And while I was there, our little group toured the area of the Pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed a man who'd been lame for 38 years. Our group wasn't very big, and there weren't many people there on that day and so did a little exploring and I found this (showing a hole in the ground with metal steps descending into the ground).

What is this?

That's right – it's a hole in the ground.

So what do you think I did?

That's right – I went down those steps into that hole to see what was there. And you know, I wasn't afraid. I knew others had been down there before me, and I figured most of them had made it out before me so I was pretty sure it was safe. And you know what I found when I went down those steps?

Yeah... it was a hole in the ground. It was a cistern that the Crusaders had built to store water in case of a long siege of the city. But the reason I went down there was because it was an adventure. I WANTED to see what was down there.

That's why I don't fear the grave.

Others have gone there before me... and at least one person has come out of the grave – Jesus Christ. So I don't fear the grave – it's just a doorway to a new adventure... and I want to see what is on the other side.

A poet named Calvin Miller once wrote this poem:

"I once scorned ev'ry fearful thought of death, when it was but the end of pulse and breath,

But now my eyes have seen that - past the pain - there is a world that's waiting to be claimed.

Earthmaker, Holy, let me now depart, for living's such a temporary art,

And dying is but getting dressed for God, our graves are merely doorways cut in sod."

(PAUSE)

Now, what I find interesting is how Jesus dealt with these two men on the road to Emmaus.

They're filled with despair.

Their faces are downcast.

They've given up and they're going home.

And what does Jesus do?

Does He tell them WHO He is?

No, He doesn't does He?

“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.”

Luke 24:15-16

Now hold that thought for a minute. (PAUSE)

I’ve known preachers (myself included) that felt Jesus was upset with these men for their unbelief. We’ve read Jesus comment to them \**“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”* Luke 24:25) and we preachers begin to think that Jesus is rebuking them.

(Our children’s minister is of Italian descent and he’s joked before that I don’t know how to talk like Italians do, so I got down off the stage and walked over to him) You know, Greg has joked that I don’t know how to talk like Italians do, and so I’m going to talk like Jesus would have to the men from Emmaus as if He were an Italian:

“Hey, whatsa matta you? You dumb or something?

You mamma slap you on the head a few too many times when you were a kid?

Whatsa matta – you not smart enough to study the Scriptures and know what was supposed to happen?

Hey, whatsa matta you?”

Now, do you REALLY think that’s how Jesus would have treated these men?

Of course not.

One of the prophecies about Jesus was that He wouldn’t “break a bruised reed or put out a smoldering wick”. In other words He wouldn’t treat people roughly if they were struggling or hurting.

Now, if you were thinking you were something special or treated others with disrespect, He might slap you upside the head... but not if you were filled with grief like these men were.

These men were hurting. They’d just seen Jesus die on the cross. It literally hurt them to think about how Jesus had been treated. And now they’re filled with despair.

So how did Jesus deal with these men?

He dealt with them the same way He deals with us.

And He dealt with them the same way we should with those around us who are struggling. Remember He didn’t tell them who He was because that would have ruined the approach He took with them.

- 1st – He listened to them. He asked them what they were talking about. Now, He KNEW what they'd been saying but He wanted to hear their story. He wanted them to talk it out... He WANTED to listen to them.

When you're dealing with people who struggle... the 1st thing you need to do is let them tell you their story. Listen to them.

- Next, Jesus reminded them of the promises from Scripture.

"... beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Luke 24:27

Too often, we make the mistake of trying to offer people our opinion, our viewpoint, how we see things rather than what God has to say. Now, your opinions and views have value, but they don't have the same power as God's written word. Without knowing the promises of God... people have no hope.

Unless you can share the hope of God's promises... you can't help.

- Lastly, He gave them something physical to hang their faith on.

"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." Luke 24:30-31

ILLUS: Immediately after WW II, the Allies gathered hungry, homeless children and placed them in large camps. There they fed and took care of the children. But at night they did not sleep well. They seemed restless and afraid. Finally, a psychologist hit upon a solution. He said:

When they put the children to bed, they were to give each one a slice of bread to hold. If they wanted more to eat, more was provided. But that special slice of bread was not to be eaten -- it was just to hold.

And it was like magic.

The children went to sleep, subconsciously feeling that they'd have something to eat tomorrow. And that assurance alone gave the children the HOPE they needed to make it through the night.

Now, what we're going to do at this point in the sermon is lay hold of the physical thing that Jesus gave US to hang our faith on. This was the one piece of bread/cup that gives us hope and helps us to make it thru the night without fear or doubt. We call it the Lord's Supper.

(We called the servers to the front to take the plates to pass to the congregation)

CLOSE: You know, a lot of people think of the Lord's Supper as a "private" thing. They view it as eating the bread and drinking of the cup as something they do kind of "by themselves." But you need to realize that even if you were in this room all by



yourself – if there was no one here but you – you wouldn't be partaking of the Lord's Supper all by yourself.

Do you know why?

That's right – because Jesus would be here, eating the meal with you.

Oftentimes people think of "Christianity" as being some kind of ancient teaching based on musty old books and letters that well (pause) it's all in the past.

And that's how these 2 men on the road to Emmaus were thinking.

Jesus HAD been alive... but He's dead now.

He was... but now He's not

And as they walked the road to Emmaus, they didn't realize that Jesus was walking right there beside them all the time. And it was only in the breaking of the bread that their eyes were opened... and they realized He'd been there all the time.

Once you realize that you realize that you're not alone. Not just on Sunday, but on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and the rest of the week. He's always there beside you and willing to comfort you in the midst of a dark and difficult world.

Jesus is RIGHT HERE... RIGHT NOW.

But you can't truly know His presence until you belong to Him.

INVITATION