

Happily Ever After

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to read now from a book at the end of the New Testament called the Book of Revelation. It's a book that's really full of rich symbolism and imagery. And I'm going to read from the first chapter.

So John's writing to us in the Book of Revelation, chapter 1, verse 9. I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

On the Lord's day, I was in the Spirit. And I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet which said, Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands. And among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace.

[1 : 3 2] And his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand, he held seven stars. And coming out of his mouth was a sharp double-edged sword.

His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

Then he placed his right hand on me and said, Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last. I am the living one.

I was dead. And now look. I am alive forever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Write, therefore, what you've seen. What is now? And what will take place later? The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this.

[2 : 3 9] The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. And the seven lampstands are the seven churches. Amen.

This is the word of God. Okay. I'm going to have a little drink.

And I'm sure you're probably having a cup of something. I want to think with you for a little while about what we read there in Revelation.

And just this whole Easter story, which some of us know well. Most of us will know about. Some of us, it will mean a lot to us.

Some of us, it's something that we view with a great deal of skepticism. But stories are important. And I think everybody loves a story with a happy ending.

[3 : 39] So you might have your favorite stories like Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, The Little Mermaid, Frozen, Lord of the Rings. Stories that we knew from childhood. And in these stories, we see sort of a common storyline or thread, a narrative, where the characters go through so many trials and adversities.

And everything seems to hang in the balance. And then all of a sudden, there is this joyful turn. And everything reverses. And the story has a happy ending.

And happy endings matter to us because we want to feel good about the way things are going to turn out. But for lots of people right now, with the coronavirus and the crisis around us, I think it's probably true that happy endings seem harder to find.

The news is so bad. And all the things that we were holding on to, promises of peace and prosperity, a life of pleasure, all that suddenly has been taken from us so quickly that it feels like a crazy dream.

But as Christians at Easter, we are bearing witness to a better story. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ultimate happy ending.

[5 : 09] The Son of God, Jesus Christ, was put to cruel death on a cross. He was laid in the grave.

But on the third day, he rises again. That's the great story, the joyful turning, that there is at the heart of the Christian message.

And it's a turning point that has a real impact on us today because Jesus says, I am alive forever and ever.

And so even today in a world that seems full of turmoil, it's Jesus that holds the key to life. So, sociologists and people who sort of, you know, cultural commentators, as they talk about Western culture, they would say that for a long time we've been what they would call a death-denying culture, where most of us are removed from death.

We don't have to deal with it. We don't see people dying. It's dealt with in a kind of much more professional capacity. And we don't really think about our own death much or talk about death.

[6 : 28] And then all of a sudden, our news is full of death and doom and bad news. And it's really depressing. I don't know about you, but I'm not enjoying watching the news right now.

And it stirs up those questions that maybe we've not been willing to ask. Do we have hope in the face of death? Should I be scared of death?

And what I want to say and what Jesus says is this. There is only hope in the face of death if death has been defeated. There is only life after death if death has been defeated.

Well, who defeated death? Only Jesus. Jesus says, I am the living one. I was dead.

And now, Luke, I am alive forever and ever. And it's this Jesus who holds out his hand and offers life to us today. And offers hope.

[7 : 33] So every week, I give my congregation a Thursday thought. Something to remember on Thursday morning when they wake up and they try and think, what was church about last Sunday? And so my Thursday thought is this.

Our hope in hard times comes from being held in the hand of Jesus. Our hope in hard times comes from being held in the hand of Jesus.

I'm going to think about these two different things with you then. First of all, this idea that Jesus rose to die no more, to try and understand that. And then secondly, to just see why is resurrection the good news that we need to hear in hard times.

So two things. Jesus rose to die no more. What's that about? And then secondly, why is resurrection the good news we need in hard times?

What does it mean Jesus rose to die no more? Well, it means this. That Jesus is alive today and he is alive forevermore.

[8 : 44] It means that Christians believe that death is not the end, that there is life after death. And that death does not have the final word over our lives.

Because what we're remembering today is that Jesus rose in power from the grave and he rose to live permanently.

He is alive forever and ever in the power of an unending life. So that means that Jesus has defeated the power of death.

And that for those who trust in Jesus, death is no longer the last word. Jesus says that by his death and resurrection, he now holds the power of death and Hades in his hands.

And he can give eternal life to all who ask. For lots of us, of course, the whole idea there of resurrection is really difficult.

[9 : 50] You know, it doesn't seem credible. And so for those of us who are not Christians or who are trying to figure out Christianity, we're kind of like puzzled by this. Why do Christians fly in the face of reason and of sense and believe that a dead man rose to life again?

Well, remember, we're not just talking about a dead man. We're talking about somebody that we believe is the son of God. And we're saying that we believe he rose to life again.

And our belief is based on historical evidence. It's based on personal experience. And it's based on the reasonableness of the Christian worldview.

The Christian worldview, which tells us there is a personal creator God who has spoken to us as he spoke to Danielle. through his word, the Bible.

We think that that view of the world, of a world created by a personal God who communicates with us through the Bible. We find that the most persuasive explanation of life.

[11 : 05] We find it the most persuasive explanation of the world as we encounter it. Well, what's the historical evidence for the resurrection?

We know that Jesus really lived. His existence, his crucifixion, his empty tomb are all widely accepted by historians. On top of this, we as Christians point to the eyewitness testimony contained in the Gospels, written within the lifetime of those who were contemporaries of Jesus.

This eyewitness testimony gives credence to the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ. We also understand that the idea of personal bodily resurrection prior to the end of the world was not one that the Jewish people or people of the first century held to.

The idea of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave was as incredible to them as it is to you. This wasn't an idea that was waiting to happen or some kind of wish fulfillment.

It was extraordinary for them as it is for us. We see the inexplicable transformation of his despondent and despairing disciples into a group who will risk everything to tell the world that Jesus has risen.

[12 : 35] And when we look at all attempted explanations for the empty tomb, well, there is a lack of other credible explanations. The fact that dead men don't rise is one that we accept.

And fundamental to our understanding that the resurrection of Jesus demands attention because it is extraordinary. And it can't be ignored for that reason.

Alongside the historical evidence, there's our personal experience, my experience, the experience of billions of others of Christians, that we know Jesus, that we've met with Jesus.

Just the kind of experience that Danielle was speaking about a little while ago. So that's what Christians believe about resurrection. Jesus is alive, he has defeated death, and he is alive forever.

And it's a little bit about why we believe that. There's lots of places you can go to find out more about why Christians believe in the resurrection and have good reason to do so.

[13 : 45] But I also want us to think just for a little while about why is the resurrection good news to people living through hard times? Now, just think about that.

Why is resurrection good news today? Or why was resurrection good news to a man called John living on an island called Patmos at the end of the first century?

When John had this vision, it was an old, old dude. And he was living through a very difficult time personally. He'd been sent into exile onto an island called Patmos in the Aegean Sea, which was like a prison colony.

He'd been sent there because of his Christian testimony and his leadership in the church. So he's been banished, cut off from family and friends and home.

So he's being persecuted for his faith and suffering because of it. And he's writing to a church at the end of the first century, which is facing harsh persecution.

[14 : 52] So we read the list of churches who this is being sent to, this revelation. And they're all in kind of modern day Turkey. And he's trying to speak to them too about how do you live through crisis and hard times?

Because for first century Christians, being a Christian meant loss of employment, loss of income. It meant social ostracism. It could mean being shunned by your family.

It might mean the loss of your home. It might mean exile. It certainly meant the loss of social standing. And for many, it meant the loss of their life.

Many Christians died for their faith in the first century church. And so Paul's writing to people, or John's writing to people in crisis. And what answer does he have for them?

What hope does he offer? Well, he doesn't offer an escape pod to get away from all their troubles. He doesn't offer them a second home in the country where they can get away from every kind of danger.

[16 : 02] He doesn't bring some kind of powerful word that promises that all their problems will be magically dealt with because they're Christians.

What John brings to Christians in crisis, what John holds onto for himself and for others, is a vision of Jesus Christ. A vision of his ultimate authority and glory as the risen one.

The one who, because he has risen from the grave, reigns in power over history and humanity. In his vision, which just reads in such an extraordinary way to us, he picks up on lots of images and symbols from the Old Testament part of the Bible.

And he paints this really dramatic picture of Jesus as the God of all ages. The first and the last.

The glorious and the mighty one who holds life and death in his hand. John says it's him you need to see if you're going to hold on in hard times.

[17 : 14] When we have this vision of Jesus, it's not that our problems disappear, but suddenly they don't overwhelm us. Because there is hope and hard times from being held in the hands of this great risen Jesus.

What will we learn from this crisis? That's what Paul, John was trying to speak to people in crisis and say, what do you need to learn? You need to learn Jesus is on the throne. He is alive forever. What will we learn gain from our crisis?

From the coronavirus crisis? I was reading this book over the last week. The Man Who Saw Everything by Deborah Levy. And page one just starts with this.

It says this. It's a book about a man called Saul Adler. So on page one it says, attention, Saul Adler. Look to the left.

Look to the right. Cross the road and get to the other side. Now we sometimes think that navigating a crisis means getting to the other side.

[18 : 29] We're faced with a coronavirus crisis. And really, we do just want it all to be over and to have made it safely through to the other side. But navigating a crisis is really an immersion course in navigating life and history and the meaning of our own existence.

All the questions that we put off are suddenly forced into our faces, not to be ignored anymore. So in this book, the man who saw everything, paying attention, crossing the road, getting to the other side.

These are literary devices used for Saul Adler to try to understand himself and his life. And how he makes it to the other side.

How he understands the world he inhabits. At one point, he's in hospital and his doctor comes along and chats to him in the evening. And they've built a bit of a friendship.

He says, Saul, tell me, Saul, what do you think a normal life would be like? The doctor started to answer his own question. Housing, food, work, health.

[19 : 47] But those things were not enough. I was crying and sweating. What was the rest of it? To live without fear?

No, that was impossible. To live with less fear, I whispered. To live with more hope.

To not be hopeless all the time. I didn't know where all the tears were coming from. Life is shocking.

As we look to get into the other side of this crisis, we also have to try and use this time to understand our lives.

To figure out what we make of life and of death. When this crisis is over, will you and I be any more ready for the ultimate crisis?

[20 : 57] Of dealing with our own mortality? Will we have learned anything about how we can live without fear? And how we can live with hope?

And from his crisis, the apostle John says, Jesus, the risen Jesus. Trust Jesus for life and for death.

That's the good news of Easter. Jesus says he's the answer. He holds the key of death and Hades. Now, I don't know who you trust your house keys to, but not many people get a key for my house.

They need to be totally trustworthy. God gives Jesus the keys of death and Hades because Jesus is the one who is trustworthy. He has defeated death.

So let's learn this great truth in the crisis that we now face. Jesus is trustworthy. And that means when we come to the final crisis of our own lives, when we come to death itself, we will be able to trust ourselves to him, to this trustworthy Jesus.

[22 : 20] Because Jesus has power. He says, do not be afraid to John the apostle and to us. He has power.

He rules over everything. We don't need to be afraid. And there's a permanency to what he does. I am alive forevermore. There is a new state of affairs in this world that can't be undone.

Very little feels certain in our world right now. But Jesus is risen forever. He offers life eternal and that's what's certain. There is power, there is permanency, and then there is God's presence with us.

At the end of the vision in chapter one, he holds seven stars in his right hand. And he says that refers to seven churches. These churches going through the crisis of hardship and persecution.

And he says, you're not alone. I hold you in my hand. I'm with you. I'm near you. For Christians right now, Jesus is near.

[23 : 24] That's what the resurrection makes certain. He is with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is seated in heaven above and he reigns in his church.

He is present in his church and with his people by the power of the Holy Spirit. So our hope in hard times comes from being held in the hand of Jesus. So this morning, just slow down now for a minute.

If you've been able to absorb everything I've said, it's a lot to take in. So just slow down and think for a moment about how best to respond to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I'd really like you to pray a simple prayer. Maybe it's a prayer you've prayed many times. Maybe it's a prayer you've never said before. But the prayer just goes like this.

Lord Jesus. You can say it after me if you want. Lord Jesus, you are the one who is alive forevermore. You hold the keys of death and Hades in your hand.

[24 : 33] Please be my savior. Please be with me in life and in death. When hard times come, hold me in your hands.