



TIME OF GRACE®

Easter From the Holy Land: Where Death Lost Its Sting

Study Notes

Summary

This special Easter episode was recorded when Pastor Mike was in Israel. See the places where Jesus died and was buried, imagine what happened there, but most of all learn that because of Jesus, death doesn't get the last word. Rejoice and be glad because death has lost its sting and Jesus has given us the victory!

- **1 Peter 2:24:** "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."
- **Isaiah 53:9:** He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.
- **Matthew 28:6:** He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.
- **Revelation 22:13:** I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.
- **3 Things That Jesus' Resurrection Means for You:**
 1. You will never be _____.
Matthew 28:20: Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.
 2. You don't have to be afraid to _____.
1 Corinthians 15:54,55: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"
 3. When loved ones die believing in Jesus, you can grieve with _____.
1 Thessalonians 4:13,14: ¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

Points to Ponder

1. Pastor Mike's definition of *hope* is "a for-sure future." Contrast that with a dictionary definition of *hope*. Why does Jesus make all the difference?
2. If you know the fact that Jesus is alive, what does that mean for the good times and troubled times of life?
3. Read John chapters 20 and 21. Meditate on these chapters and what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection mean for you personally.

Homework for Next Week

Read Acts 17:17; Isaiah 53; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

Time of Grace Ministry
Easter from the Holy Land: Where Death Lost Its Sting
I Peter 2:24; Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 28:6; Revelation 22:13; I Corinthians 15: 55-56
April 4, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

In early 2020, I got to explore Israel. “I’m sitting literally in the place where Jesus’ feet touched.” I saw some amazing places. “The old city of Jerusalem, the Garden of Gethsemane, beautiful Nazareth, and the Mount of Beatitudes, Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee,” and got to record dozens of video devotions just for you.

And I got to record a really special, incredibly unique, unforgettable Easter message from within a first century tomb. So, enjoy this message and happy Easter!

I got into the country in anticipation of a big tour with about 85 people. But I got into the country just before everything got shut down due to the Coronavirus. As a result, I was in Israel without my group and it turns out a lot of other groups had made the same decision. Flights coming in were cancelled, tours were shut down or delayed. Normally the parking lots that would have been filled with tour bus after tour bus were empty. And that meant that I got to see an Israel like many people will never see. You know, because Jesus is kind of a big deal, lots of people like to see the places where Jesus was born, where he lived, where he did miracles, where he died, and where he rose. But without all those tourists, sometimes it was – it was just us. At one point, we’re on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and we’re standing at the excavation site of the Synagogue of Magdala where Mary Magdalene was from. And I’m looking at this ancient church where Jesus almost surely preached and I’m just meditating on the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, shows up in small churches and how Jesus shows up and loves the most messy and messed up people. And I was waiting for the tour bus to show up and, you know, interrupt my meditation but it never did. And I had just an hour to think. We made it down from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem and we went to the church of the Holy Sepulcher; that’s the place that has the strongest tradition where Jesus died, was buried, and then rose from the dead. And we got there just as the sun was setting and normally, you’d wait in line and have this brief moment to think about the death and resurrection of Jesus but not on that night. And just in case that wasn’t enough to fill up my heart, then we got to the Garden Tomb. The footage I’m about to show you in this episode, somehow and it still feels like a miracle, it wasn’t packed with tourists; it was just a few employees and us. To be able to think about the death and resurrection of Jesus, what it means for our lives today, why we don’t have to be afraid of cancer or sickness or death because of what might have happened in that very spot. It was so insane, I don’t think it will ever happen again, even if I go to Israel every year until I die but it happened on that day.

Now, I’m not trying to make you jealous, okay? I’m not sharing all these things to say, “Look, what a great time I had in Israel and you’re not there!” I’m trying to share that with you because my experience there has a lot in common with your Easter this year. Because of the

Coronavirus, lots of us aren't having a big Easter. And honestly, it kind of stinks, but that's why I want to remind you today of what I experienced in a fairly empty Israel; that the original Easter story wasn't about hundreds or thousands of people. It wasn't about Easter hymns, Easter brunch, Easter breakfast or Easter fellowship. The original Easter, the first annual Easter that changed the world forever, it didn't happen with tons of people; it just happened with one or two and Jesus. I know we're still in the middle of this; I know all of us wish we could push a button and end it and get back to normal Easter like it should be. But what about the original Easter where just Jesus was enough?

So this year, you might go to church with a handful of people; they might be scattered through the sanctuary in just a couple of chairs. Or you might be safer at home just sitting on a couch; it might just be you, a significant other, a few kids. But that's exactly what Easter originally was. So sit back, relax, and enjoy. Scratch that – sit on the edge of your couch, stand up on your feet, lift up your eyes, because there in the room, even if it's just you, is the Jesus who is not dead. He is risen and so we sing today on this Easter, hallelujah and amen!

Pastor Mike Novotny

Wow! We are here! I'm standing in Jerusalem on a gorgeous morning in front of the place where many Christians believe that Jesus himself rose from the dead. In a few hours, tons of tourists are going to crowd this place. They're going to stand in line and wait to see the tomb and take their pictures but we somehow got in early. No one's here but us and it's simply crazy. We get to think about the place where Jesus died, where he was buried, and where he conquered death for me and for you.

We have a few minutes then to pause and reflect; we don't have to stand in line or feel rushed. Today, we get to meditate on the most important weekend in human history and I'm so glad that you're here with me. Now, I should be pretty honest with you, if you would ever come to Jerusalem or just Google it, you would find out that there are two different places where we're not quite sure where it all went down. Just a few hundred yards from here is the church of the Holy Sepulcher and it's the most traditional place where Jesus died, was buried, and was raised. In my opinion, that's probably the place where it happened but there's some pretty strong evidence that it might have happened here, too. So we're not 100 percent sure where it happened but we know that it happened and that's the good news of our faith.

But can I tell you why I hope and I wish that this was the spot? Because here you can picture it. The church of the Holy Sepulcher with all its tradition and dark walls and cluttered art and too many tourists, you look around and it's hard to imagine how it happened and where it happened. But when you come here to the Garden Tomb, especially when no one's around, when you see the trees, the flowers bursting, you hear the birds singing, you can almost feel it. You feel like Mary walking to the tomb on that first Easter morning. You feel like Peter and John racing for the tomb and peeking inside. When you're here, you can imagine exactly how it happened so let's do that today. Let's talk about the most important weekend in all of human history when Jesus, the Son of God, came here to die, to be buried, to be laid in a tomb, and to be raised from the grave for the forgiveness of our sins.

So while we have some time and space to breathe and reflect, let's look at the places where Jesus died, where he was buried, and where he rose from the grave. Come on and follow me.

That is Golgotha; the place where many people believe that Jesus was crucified and died for us. And today, maybe you can see, it's a modern bus station so it's loud and not that beautiful. If you hear buses backing out, that's because that's what it is. But 2,000 years ago, this might have been the rocky hill where Jesus gave his life for us. In the late 1800's, a British officer named Charles Gordon was exploring this area and he noticed something kind of peculiar on the rocks behind me - two dark eye sockets. Can you see them? It's a little bit tough to spot now that erosion has worn away the rock but he saw what looked like a skull and he thought of that verse from the gospels where it says they led him out to Golgotha, which means the place of the skull, and they crucified him. Can you picture Jesus up there? It begs the question why in the world is Jesus there? Why would Jesus be on a cross? Now the criminals on either side of him, that might make sense. But Jesus? The King of Kings? Jesus? Who never once sinned against anyone? Jesus? The Son of God is on a cross? Why would that be?

Now, I actually saw one of the answers to that question at this very spot about 10 years ago. I stood here about a decade ago on my first trip to Israel and down at the modern bus station, I saw a brawl and it was disturbing. I heard these young men shouting at each other and suddenly, a pack of them came - 50, maybe 75 - screaming, fists raised, voices raised, it was disturbing just to watch. I held my breath and it reminded me that that kind of stuff is why Jesus was there. Because in those emotional moments, we humans do some pretty ugly things. We can be angry when we feel threatened. In a relationship when you feel disrespected, you can say things that are the opposite of patient or kind or good. We can even make vows to love and respect people no matter what and then we break them when emotion gets the best of us. When we feel threatened at work, disrespected on the court, like things happen and it's disturbing. I felt disturbed seeing that sin. Imagine how disturbed God feels when he sees our sin? But that's why Jesus was there. He didn't want God to look down at us in disgust. He didn't want us, God, to hold his breath and turn away his face from sinners like you and like me. And so Jesus restrained all of his power as the Son of God and he ended up there on a cross. The apostle Peter put it this way: "Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross." He carried our sins. He took them. All the ugliness, all the stuff that's messed up, all the stuff we regret, all the stuff we've forgotten about, he took it to the cross so that God would remember it no more. Yes, the Son of God was on a cross but you might have heard the story; he didn't stay there. He was buried and then soon after, he rose from the grave. So let me show you where it happened.

And then Jesus was placed here at the tomb. Back in the first century, wealthy Jews would build tombs like this. They'd chisel a cave out of solid rock, just big enough to duck into, and they'd also chisel out little beds, little niches, where the bodies of their loved ones could be put. And even though Jesus wasn't family to Joseph of Arimathea, Joseph loved Jesus. He followed him, respected him, believed that he was the Messiah and so, in his grief, he gave Jesus his tomb. It's a reminder of that famous prophecy from Isaiah 53. The one that says the Messiah would suffer for our transgressions; by his wounds we would be healed. It went on to say this: "He, the Messiah, was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death." It's fascinating,

isn't it? It didn't just say that Jesus would die but his grave would be one where sinful people would be buried. He'd be assigned a grave along with the rich just like Joseph of Arimathea.

And can you picture all that happening here? The shocked Nicodemus and Joseph quietly carrying Jesus' body into the tomb? Maybe Nicodemus grabbed Jesus by the shoulders and Joseph carries the feet and they slowly go inside the cave. Can you picture over there the women, Mary Magdalene, and all those who had followed him from Galilee that had sacrificed so much? They believed that he was the one who was going to rescue and save them but then their hopes were dashed. They thought he was the Son of God but then he was gone. He had said that he was the light of the world and then his body was placed in the dark. He had claimed that he was the way and the truth and the life but then the life of Jesus was over. John's gospel tells us the sad story. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. On the quietness of that Friday, those who loved Jesus put his body inside. They had lost hope and their Savior; their hope was gone. But hope was about to dawn because, as you might have heard, Jesus didn't stay here. I'm about to take you inside but we're not going to find the one that we love so much because he is risen. Let me prove it to you; come on inside!

And they put Jesus here. My voice sounds like it's echoing; it's because we're inside a tomb and this is the place where they might have laid our Savior's body. You can see the stone chiseled out. There's actually something really interesting about this tomb is that right at the end. There's an extra little notch that seems to have been carved. Some people speculate that Joseph of Arimathea was so tall and Jesus was a little bit taller and so Joseph built the tomb for himself but then his Savior needed a little more space so he chiseled it out before he laid the body there. But that's not the most interesting thing about this place. The most interesting thing is, to quote an angel, "He is not here. He has risen just as he said." The good news of this tomb is that there's no Jesus because he kept his promise to us. And really, the proof is in that little graffiti on the wall. The cross over there comes from the fifth or sixth century where Christians who came to this tomb sketched that classic symbol and they put a couple Greek letters on that cross. Above the crossbar are the letters that stand for Jesus Christ and then below the crossbar are the Greek letters alpha and omega. Do you know what those letters mean? The alpha and omega are like the A to Z of the Greek alphabet; the beginning and the end. In the book of Revelation, Jesus says, "I am the alpha and the omega; the beginning and the end. I was dead but now I'm alive." It's kind of a fancy way of saying that God is eternal. Like, Jesus didn't come as the alpha and then die and was buried as the beta or the gamma or the lambda or the kappa. No, he is the alpha and the omega; he always is here. He's always with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. His love, his mercy, his compassion, his forgiveness and salvation are unfailing. They're never going to end on you and I can't wait to tell you what that means. So let's go outside back into the light and let me explain to you the meaning of this glorious message of Easter.

And do you know what all of this means for you and for me? The fact that Jesus died here and he was buried here and he rose from the dead right here means about a thousand things but I know we don't have forever so let me tell you three things that Jesus' resurrection means for your life, your death, and for the death of those that you love.

First for your life, because Jesus died for you and then was raised for you, it means that you will never, ever, ever be alone. That you will always have someone with you and not just any someone but **THE** someone that your heart was created to crave. I know in this life we always wish that the people we care about the most would be with us and that they treat us well but that doesn't always happen, right? I've been in Israel for the past couple of days and it's been so good but there have been moments when I've missed my wife and kids so much. And you've experienced that same thing, too; those moments of loneliness or grief, especially if you're a widow or you've been through a divorce or your closest friend from work got a new job or your best friend from school took a job with her mom and dad on the other side of the country. But because Jesus is alive he makes this promise to us. Matthew 28: "And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." Because Jesus is alive, he can be with us. Always. And because he's not just some guy, he's also the Son of God, he can keep that promise and be with us always. So you might be sitting in a nursing home right now but the risen Jesus is with you. You might be sitting in a jail cell for years to come but God himself is with you. You might be trying to survive middle school or make it through the years when you're raising your kids and they don't sleep but Jesus is with you. You might face stress at work, you might be in a rocky marriage, you might be going through a divorce. You might be sitting in a hospital bed right now but think about this: You might not have the closest friends and family but you have God and because he didn't just die for you, he was raised for you, you always have hope. And you might feel lonely but you're not alone. Jesus said I will be with you always.

The second thing that this holy weekend means is that you don't have to be afraid to die. A couple days ago, we were up in Nazareth in northern Israel and a Christian group has built this place called Nazareth the Village where they try to show you what first century life was like in Israel and they have a tomb a little bit like this. It's a hollowed out cave, it actually has the big round stone in front of it, and I captured this amazing picture because the day that we were there was also the day of a great Jewish festival and celebration called Purim. And on Purim, lots of people, especially little kids, dress up - like Halloween in America - and as I was taking this tour through Nazareth Village, I'm standing in front of this beautiful tomb and this little girl is right in front of me listening to the tour guide and what is she dressed up as? A bumblebee. And there's, you know, her little stinger and her little wings and she's right in front of a tomb. And do you know the Bible well enough to remember the passage that talks about that very thing? 1 Corinthians 15 is sometimes called the great resurrection chapter of the Bible and here's what the apostle Paul writes: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, o death, is your victory? Where, o death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law but thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Do you hear what Paul is saying? Death stung Jesus; eternal condemnation. It got him on the cross but when he conquered condemnation, when he left the grave empty, death couldn't sting us anymore. That's why Jesus said I'm the resurrection and the life and the one who believes in me will live even though they die. And that means you don't have to be afraid of it. You don't have to wonder what's on the other side. On the other side of death is Jesus because he's risen. Now, it might be hard, your upcoming death might be uncertain, it might be years from now, it might be days from now but listen, you don't have to be afraid. You follow a Jesus who proved

that death is not too much for him. He stayed in his tomb for a few days and then he burst out with light and life and if you believe in him you can have light and life, too. So when everyone's afraid about the latest thing the doctor said, the surgery might not work, you tell them about Jesus. You tell them you worship a Savior who's not here in the grave. He conquered death and he did it for you. Thanks be to God! We have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And the final thing that the resurrection teaches us - at least the final thing I'm going to share with you today - is about the death of those that we love. Now there's a lot of hard things that we go through in life. There's uncertainties and worries and parenting and debt and craziness at work. But one of the hardest things that many of us go through is the death of those we care about deeply. But do you know what the apostle Paul did in his letter to the Thessalonians? He reminded them that we believe in a Jesus who died and rose for the people we love, too. Listen to these classic words from 1 Thessalonians 4: "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope for we believe that Jesus died and rose again." We might grieve, you might miss your husband, your wife, your child, your friend, but we don't have to grieve like the world that has no hope. Why, Paul says? Because we believe in this. We believe in a bloody cross and an empty tomb and that means we can do something beautiful. We can grieve with hope. We can miss them with hope. My definition of hope is a for sure future. It's going to happen. It's coming. It's not a question mark. It's absolutely going to happen, it's for sure, and because Jesus rose from the dead, for sure we're going to see them again. We will see their face. We will watch their face as they look at the face of God and we will feel something we have never felt before.

So death does not get the last word. Whether it's the struggles of this life, we know that Jesus is with us. Whether it's our upcoming death, we know that the sting of death is gone because of the empty tomb. Whether we're going to a funeral of someone we love, we can grieve and cry and mourn and be sad. But in the end, we can also rejoice and be glad because death has lost its sting and Jesus has given us the victory.

I seriously still cannot believe that I'm here but even better than this is that you're there with God and that will never end. My journey in Israel is almost over; soon there's going to be a long, long plane ride, a short night of sleep. This amazing moment will end but because of Jesus it won't. You have life that never ends with him. Brothers and sisters, happy Easter! He's risen. He's not here just as he said and because of that, God is always here with us. Amen!

Let's pray.

Dear Jesus, we speak to you because you're not dead; not anymore. You are alive! You sit at the right hand of the Father and you are ruling over everything for the good of your church. And everything means everything - all the unexpected stuff of the past year, the pandemic, everything that's happened that's not out of your control because you are the Risen King and you are the Lord of Lords and so we refuse to be afraid. We refuse to be anxious, we refuse to be worried, because you are God, you are good, and you are alive. Take away our fears. We celebrate you today! We pray, Jesus, in your name, Amen.