

# “Marrowbone & Easter Hope”

1 Peter 1:3-5 <sup>1</sup>

Today I’m going to tell you “a tale of two cities.” Charles Dickens’s famous novel of that name was about Paris and London; this story begins in Marrowbone, a small village in south central Kentucky, just west of Burkesville.

Very early on Friday morning, March 26, 2010, John and Sadie Esh loaded their family into their van in Marrowbone to head north to a friend’s wedding in Iowa. At 5:15 a.m., after they’d been on the road for about an hour, a tractor-trailer traveling south on I-65 crossed the median, crashed through a cable barrier, and smashed head-on into their van.

Eleven people were killed in that horrific wreck. It was the worst accident in the State of Kentucky in more than a decade, and the Emergency Management Director at the scene of the accident was Kerry McDaniel, an old friend of mine. Kerry and his wife, Vicki, were deeply involved in the events that unfolded in the aftermath of that tragedy, and they included me in that journey.

John and Sadie Esh were pillars of the small Marrowbone Christian Brotherhood, a congregation that is part of the Mennonite movement.<sup>2</sup> The Marrowbone Mennonite community is unusual in that, until recently, it was part of the Amish community and used horses and buggies. That changed about six years ago when members decided that the Gospel called on them to be more active in reaching out to the wider world in both human service projects and evangelism. That’s when they bought the van.<sup>3</sup>

Marrowbone deacon Joel Byers was one of the first church members to arrive at the crash site. Amid the urgency of the moment, Joel said he faced a spiritual choice. “It could make me bitter,” he said, but becoming bitter would be surrendering to the forces of evil. “I can let this ruin my life,” Joel thought to himself. “I can let this ruin my relationships with others. Or I can look at this awful scene and [know] that God took my friends to heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

Two days later, on Sunday night, scores of Mennonite folk gathered in a large circle in a warehouse in Marrowbone, singing a capella four-part harmony that echoed from the concrete walls, “And Lord, haste the day when our faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back as a scroll, the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, even so, it is well with my soul.”<sup>5</sup>

They also sang one of John Esh’s favorite hymns, “Finish, then, Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be; let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee: changed from glory into glory, till in heav’n we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.”<sup>6</sup>

Marrowbone, then, is the first of our two cities, a city that darkness cannot overcome, a city whose faith shines brightly before a watching world, even through anguished tears. The

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 3, 2015, Good Friday.

<sup>2</sup> R. G. Dunlop, “Driver of truck that collided with church van that killed 11 people on Kentucky highway is identified,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 28, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Smith, “Mennonites are clinging to their faith after tragic crash,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 29, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, “Mennonites.”

<sup>5</sup> “It Is Well with My Soul,” words by Horatio Spafford (1828-1888), music by Philip Bliss (1838-1876).

<sup>6</sup> “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” words by Charles Wesley (1707-1788), music by John Zundel (1815-1882).

other “city” is called Emmaus, which was really a small village whose location we no longer know. The Bible simply tells us that it was seven miles from Jerusalem.

This part of our story happened on another Sunday evening, one long, long ago, as two of Jesus’ followers walked home from Jerusalem three days after His crucifixion. The two were deeply discouraged by Jesus’ death, and they were talking about their disillusionment as they walked into the gathering gloom.

The two travelers were joined in the darkness by a stranger who asked what they were talking about. “*You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days,*” they replied.

“*What things?*” the stranger asked.

“*The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth,*” they said. “*He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people. But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel” (Luke 24:18-21).*

“**We had hoped.**” How many times have you heard—or said—a phrase like that?

“We had *hoped* that the surgery would get all the cancer.”

“I had *hoped* to pass the exam.”

“I had *hoped* to get the job.”

Frederick Buechner once wrote that Emmaus “was no place in particular really, and the only reason they went there was that it was some seven miles distant from a situation that had become unbearable. . . . Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest die and decay; and that even the noblest ideas that men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of His life.”<sup>7</sup>

Emmaus was a town to which two followers of Jesus went when they’d lost all hope. Marrowbone is a town in which followers of Jesus celebrated Hope even as their hearts were breaking with sorrow. And it’s desperately important that you and I understand how to get from Emmaus to Marrowbone—from despair to Hope. How does that happen? As we make our way forward from Resurrection morning, we gather today to celebrate the answer to that question.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 15. We’ll begin with verse 3: “*I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ **died** for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was **buried**, and he was **raised** from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was **seen** by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, **I also saw him.**”*

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Buechner, “The Road to Emmaus,” in his book, *The Magnificent Defeat* (HarperOne, 1985).

That's the kernel of the Gospel. That's the core of our Hope: **DIED – BURIED – RAISED – SEEN**. You may want to circle those verses in your Bible. Now skip down to verse 13: *“For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.*

**“But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.** *He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 13-20).

The resurrection of Jesus, my friends, is the Anchor for our Hope. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus is the only anchor for our Hope. And the resurrection of Jesus is the key to traveling from Emmaus to Marrowbone.

Now when you and I use the word, “hope,” we usually mean “wish”: “I hope it doesn't rain today”; “I hope my car starts”; “I hope our team wins.” Such things are far, far too small for Hope. Max Lucado pointed out that “Hope is not what you expect; it is what you would never dream. It is a wild, improbable tale with a pinch-me-I'm-dreaming ending.

“It's Abraham adjusting his bifocals so he can see not just his son, but his grandson. It's Moses standing in the Promised Land not with Aaron or Miriam at his side, but with Elijah and the transfigured Christ. It's Zechariah left speechless at the sight of his wife Elizabeth, gray-headed . . . and pregnant. And it is the two Emmaus-bound pilgrims reaching out to take a piece of bread only to see that the hands from which it is offered are pierced.”<sup>8</sup>

And, as Buechner added, “As much as they would have given to have Him stay there a minute or two more, they could not make Him stay. They could not nail Him down. And that is how it always is. We can never nail him down, not even if the nails we use are real ones and the thing we nail Him to is a cross.

“He comes suddenly, out of nowhere, like the first clear light of the sun after a thunderstorm or maybe like the thunder itself; and maybe we recognize Him, and maybe we do not, and our lives are never the same again, either because we did not recognize Him or because we did.”<sup>9</sup>

My friends, the Cross of Calvary and the Empty Tomb have opened up a future before us that we hardly dare to let ourselves imagine. The message of Jesus' resurrection is that death has been vanquished. Those persons whom we have loved and whom we tend to think of as “dead” are, if they were in Christ, ALIVE today beyond anything we're able to imagine. We live in the shadows; they live in the Light.

As we consider the journey from Emmaus to Marrowbone, I need to tell you something else about Vicki McDaniel and her connection to the Marrowbone situation. Vicki has had a difficult life, and her journey has included seven major surgeries within five years—most recently brain surgery at Vanderbilt just a few weeks before the accident. It would have been easy for Vicki to give in to despair many times along her journey, but she has chosen to anchor her life and her Hope in the power of the Risen Christ, and God was able to use her in a mighty way in the aftermath of that tragedy because she did.

<sup>8</sup> Max Lucado, *God Came Near* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), chapter 16.

<sup>9</sup> Buechner, “The Road to Emmaus.”

Vicki is a follower of Jesus who, like Peter, has been willing to “get out of the boat.” And because she has made that choice, she has discovered the Hope and the Joy that come from being used by God to help turn Emmaus into Marrowbone, to help turn despair into Hope. Vicki’s life demonstrates that God is at work, right now, right here, creating a new kind of person—persons who have believed the prophet’s message that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-promised Messiah; persons who have chosen once to yield, and then to continue yielding, their wills to the Hope-full purposes of the Kingdom of God.

Choosing to have Hope means that we choose to believe that Jesus is who He says He is. Choosing such Hope doesn’t mean that we have all the answers, but it does mean that we, like the good folk of Marrowbone, have made a choice. Having had sufficient personal experience with the Living God to become persuaded that God is trustworthy, they were therefore willing to trust God beyond what they can fully understand or comprehend, and they could therefore sing, even in such awful pain, “it is well with my soul.”

The truth of the matter is that the journey of which I speak is really a tale of three cities, not just two. Not only does our Risen Lord invite us to travel from Emmaus to Marrowbone, but also from Marrowbone to the New Jerusalem, “*a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God*” (Hebrews 11:10). That’s what the Marrowbone folks were talking about when they sang, “Finish, then, Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be; let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee: changed from glory into glory, till in heav’n we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

Some of us here today may be “dressed up for Easter,” but the truth of the matter is that you still live in Emmaus. No matter what you look like on the outside, your inner life is overwhelmed by darkness, discouragement, and despair. My friends, the Good News for you today is that “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9). If that’s a choice you need to make today, you can make it right now.

Some of you have already moved from Emmaus to Marrowbone, but life has brought such challenges to you that you face the choice that Deacon Joel faced when he arrived at the crash site. You, too, have to decide whether you’re going to let your circumstances make your spirit bitter or whether you really do believe that God is trustworthy beyond what you presently understand. . . .

“There in the ground His body lay, Light of the world by darkness slain; then bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave He rose again. And as He stands in victory sin’s curse has lost its grip on me; for I am His, and He is mine, bought with the precious blood of Christ.

“Love, crucified, arose: the One who lived and died for me was Satan’s nail-pierced casualty; now He’s breathing once again. Love, crucified, arose: and the grave became a place of hope, for the heart that sin and sorrow broke is beating once again!

“Alleluia! Alleluia! Hearts to heav’n and voices raise; Sing to God a hymn of gladness, Sing to God a hymn of praise. He who on the cross as Savior for the world’s salvation bled, Jesus Christ, the King of glory, now is risen from the dead!”<sup>10</sup>

### **Will you trust Him?**

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Card, “Love, Crucified, Arose,” arranged by Tom Fettke and Camp Kirkland, in *Known by the Scars: By His Stripes We are Healed*, with dramatic narration by Max Lucado (Nashville: Genevox, 2005).