

“Encountering Jesus: Finding Hope”

The Reverend Robert Galloway

Date: March 17, 2024



Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this, he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”

The disciples said to him, “Lord if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” However, Jesus had been speaking about his death, but they thought he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” In a previous sermon, I shared with you that scientists were studying and measuring happiness and how practicing gratitude had a direct effect on a person’s happiness.

Well, I am excited to share that in that same vein, studies are being conducted to understand hope. As part of the *Trends of 2024*, The American Psychological Association published an article titled “Hope as the Antidote.” The article’s tagline claims, “Hope may be the antidote to today’s chaotic world. Here’s how to cultivate it”

If hope is the cure to the world’s turmoil today I am going to ask my doctor for a prescription for extra strength hope. According to the article, clinical research around hope began in the 1980s by Dr. C. Rick Snyder.

Dr. Snyder defined hope as *“the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways.”*¹

An excessively technical definition. Thankfully in the article, Dr. Thema Bryant provided a better answer as to what is hope. Dr. Bryant says, *“Hope isn’t a denial of what is, but a belief that the current situation is not all that can be... You can recognize something’s wrong, but also that it’s not the end of the story.”* Those words describe in part the hope I know. In the research field of hope, some general qualities distinguish hope from other emotions. Hope is active. It requires the person to take action towards a goal. Hope can be cultivated. Hope is generally future-oriented. We hope for a future that is to come.

Hope is *“the only positive emotion that requires negativity or uncertainty to be activated.”*² You have to have the good with the bad it seems. These are how the academy or science understands hope. There is even a Hope Institute leading this field. It’s a legitimate field but they seem to be studying a version of hope I am unfamiliar with. The hope we claim as Christians does not align perfectly with this scientific understanding. I don’t want to dismiss the work or definition they use. The data gathered from the studies prove that there is a clear positive impact on one’s health by engaging in hope-focused work. That hope of that understanding is good. It literally can make life better for many.

But that hope is inherently limited. Its source and cultivation is you. To keep it up you need to make progress, reach goals, cross the finish line. That is not bad or wrong but it sounds exhausting. When hope is what you need or all that you have, those are the times you need to lean on something greater, something stronger, and something enduring. That is the is where biblical hope comes to save. Our biblical or Christian hope is similar to the academic understanding.

The hope of Christians is active we participate in it. But is not a series of steps towards a goal. It can be nourished and tended to but not cultivated because it is a gift and we are not the source.

It is future-oriented but it can also be oriented to the past and present. Hope has another source besides reaction to negative experiences. It can come from God’s love for the world. Yet what makes the hope we find in Christ unique, perfect, enduring, life-giving is the fact that superior to our *hopes for something* is *our hope in Jesus Christ*. When we hope for something especially something specific we often are pushing our desires and will ahead and not listening and waiting for God’s will to reveal itself. This is not to say, we should not hope

1. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/01/trends-hope-greater-meaning-life>

for peace, or a cure for a disease, relief from pain, or any hope we may have that improves the life of a brother and sister in Christ. Pray and hope for those who need it. What we must be wary of is when we think we know best and want to assert control above God's. We hope in Christ confident of God's care for creation. When Jesus arrived in Bethany, it was a scene of a family deep in their grief. The mourning rituals are being observed. Guests were arriving from Jerusalem. Mary and Martha were grieving in their ways seemingly separate from one another. Martha meets Jesus outside and begins her direct conversation with him. All the while, Mary weeps inside the house not coming to greet their guest. For two women who are remembered for their vastly different ways of being hospitable, neither was playing hostess. And that is to be expected, the sisters have lost everything and seem to be without hope.

Dr. Allen Dwight Callahan describes the sisters as *“two women twice deserted. In death, their brother has deserted them. And in their time of desperation, Jesus has deserted them.”* When Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus about Lazarus's illness, they sent their hope as well. They hoped Jesus would arrive in time. They hoped their brother would be healed. They hoped it would all work out. But it did not and they were dealing with the outcome. I can imagine their hope waning as the days passed and Jesus did not arrive. You would think their faith in Jesus' ability or faith in his love for Lazarus would weaken too but their faith remained constant. Martha greets Jesus with words that show her continued belief in his power but also expresses her frustration. Martha goes out to meet Jesus and pointedly informs him (in case he didn't know), “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Martha is not blaming Jesus for Lazarus' death but she wants to make it clear it could have been prevented. She reveals the pain of her grief in the comment. At the same time, she demonstrates her bold faith. Martha continues, *“But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”* She knows that Jesus can change what the situation is. She knows that he alone has this ability and connection to God. Her belief that Jesus can and God will is rooted in experience and witnessing God's enduring faithfulness to God's people.

Yet while Martha is firm in her faith that Jesus can help, she still brings her raw grief in her interaction with Jesus. Jesus responds to her criticism and faith, by reminding her that Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. In the first and second centuries, the Pharisees and most Jews believed in the resurrection. It was different than our understanding. Resurrection for Jewish people at the time meant that all the dead would be given new bodies and return to an embodied life, not unlike the life they had before. Martha's next response reveals that she does not understand what Jesus is sharing. She assumed Jesus was reassuring her with the promise of the resurrection the Pharisees taught. Her retort is from a person who does not find

2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-healing-crowd/202207/the-new-science-hope>

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solace and peace in an unknown future restoration with her brother. Maybe she responded in a sharp tone to cut off Jesus from dangling hope for the future. Maybe after days of grief, her response showed her exhaustion with life and the lack of fulfilled prayers. Yes, she believes in that resurrection but she wants her brother returned to her now, and not someday.

Again, Martha's faith is vibrant and sure but it seems to be void of hope. You might think Martha should have refrained from her pointed comments and criticism because she still was asking Jesus to bring Lazarus back from the dead. If you are going to ask a favor especially a big favor most people would not open with what equates to, "You let my brother die." But that is part of the beauty and boldness of Martha's faith. She brings all of herself before Jesus. She does not hide the unpleasant. She speaks directly to him reminding him of the personal pain she experienced because Jesus didn't follow her timeline. Martha was not letting anything slide. And in response, Jesus repeats his message of resurrection.

He receives her emotions and words for better or for worse. Instead of rejecting her, walking away, or fleeing to the safety of another region, he repeats the good news. He offers her hope, a new hope which has been fulfilled. And he says to her "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Through the powerful words of Christ, Martha saw who Christ was and responded in action with her profession of faith. Did something change in that moment or perhaps she knew it all along? But She understood the resurrection he offered and saw that he was the promised Messiah. Martha knew that the resurrection and eternal life start now here on earth in the mundane every day and not at some unknown time ahead. Jesus gives Martha hope that is for something is already happening and available. The revelation of this leads Martha to profess her faith with a creed in her own words "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." As we have seen in the other stories in John, Martha's framework for understanding was upended. Her hope is not for the resurrection but a hope in the resurrection. When we hope in Christ we will not be disappointed. When we have hope we also have faith.

The two are intertwined as Hebrews 11 reminds us 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 'When we have faith we trust in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit. When we have hope we hope in Christ. That is our ultimate hope. Martha was a witness to that new hope that was given to the world in Jesus Christ. We no longer need to hope for what we think we need. When we hope in Christ we know that our present and our future is secure and glorious by the one who made us, dies for us, forgives us, and loves us.