

Irvington Presbyterian Church

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Series: A.D.

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“Hope in the Struggle?”

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Matthew 28:1-9

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. ⁵ The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.” ⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

I’m hoping that those of you who did get a study guide are reading along and have read Lesson 1. If so, you will remember that there were some discussion questions at the end of the chapter. One of the questions was: *Who do you most identify with in this episode?* Well I’m sure our answers to who you most identified with will vary.

If you, like me, have ever knowingly betrayed Jesus, as Lord and Savior, you might have answered Judas. If you, like me, have ever denied the presence of Christ in your life, you may have more closely identified with Peter. If you, like me, are trying to live a committed life in Christ as a follower of his teachings, yet find yourself disappointed in the outcomes as did Mary and Mary Magdalene were with the death of her Savior, you may identify more closely with them. If you, like me, have ever given of yourselves sacrificially only to be unappreciated, mocked and ridiculed, you may have most identified with the suffering of Jesus.

However, for me, it wasn’t necessarily that I identified with any one person in particular. What I *completely* identified with was a common thread that ran through each of these biblical characters...Judas, Peter, Mary, Mary Magdalene and yes...Jesus, himself. That thread was “struggle”. Each of them...in their own way...encountered and grappled with struggle. The struggle wasn’t the same for all of them but it was a struggle, nonetheless.

Some struggled with guilt while others struggled with fear. And the same holds true for us today. Although it has taken various forms, each of us has encountered struggle in our lives. And if you haven't, in the words of my wise 85 year old grandmother...just keep on livin'. For the bible tells us in Job 14 verse 1 that *Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble*. Essentially, struggle is inescapable. If you have breath in your body, struggle, at some point has, or will one day, come knocking at your door.

A common phrase to describe the nature of struggle in today's culture is "The struggle is real." Essentially this phrase *denotes a situation where a person wishes to express that they are encountering some sort of undesirable difficulty, yet they are dealing with it*. Essentially...they are making the best out of a messed up situation. While it does, at times, have a humorous connotation, if you were to Google it you might see an image of a hotdog being eaten with a piece of sandwich bread instead of a hotdog bun with the caption: "The Struggle is Real". The implication here is that one is so financially destitute that they can't afford the cost of a bun and instead have to settle for a piece of sandwich bread. Now to many of you this might seem small or that it lacks credibility to be called a struggle. But to some it's a real struggle to not have \$2.00 to buy a package of hotdog buns.

What "The struggle is real" conveys is that although my existential circumstances are grim... Even though things aren't how I want them to be... Although my finances are challenged... Although my health is failing... Although the vicissitudes of life are weighing heavily on me... I'm going to be alright. Essentially, today's "culture" has tapped into something that not even we as believers have bought into a 100%. And that is that there is hope even while in the struggle!

Well, in the few remaining minutes I have I want to talk about how we, as people of God, can rise to this occasion called "struggle" and know, emphatically and undoubtedly, that there is hope in the midst of it. If we look at the events leading up to our text for today, we have the advantage of already knowing how this infamous story ends. There is a gospel song that I love to hear choirs sing on Resurrections Sunday.

It's called "No Greater Love": *"Jesus went, to Calvary, to save a wretch like, you and me that's love..., They hung Him high, they stretched him wide, He hung his head, for me He died, that's love..., But that's not how, the story ends, for in three days, He rose again, that's love..."* We have the advantage of knowing the astonishing and supernatural ending to this story. One of triumph...One of supreme power.

When we look at our pericope, or chosen text, in Matthew 28 we see that the "Marys" have gone to the tomb. We know that the angel of the Lord has come before them rolling the stone away. We know that the angel says "he is not here, he is risen." We know that these two women went out and became the first proclaimers of the "good news". This is the advantage of being over 2000 years removed from the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ itself.

But the real question is, how did Jesus' followers cope while agonizing over the crucified Lord? How did they handle what appeared to be the final chapter to a well written story? After all, they, like us, were not privy to the ending as we are today. Was it possible to have hope while watching Jesus being beat? Was it possible to maintain hope while blood was dripping down like sweat? Was it possible...or was hopelessness more befitting for this situation?

If we know that hope is a desire for a certain thing to happen. And if we know that struggle is an attempt deal with something that is very difficult. Then not using hope and struggle in the same phrase just makes sense! It's easy to lose hope while in the midst of struggle when defeat seems evitable.

But today I want to show you how to merge the two...hope and struggle. Today I want to show you that hope and struggle deserve...no...they have a right to be in the same phrase! Hope and struggle...are not in opposition to one another. Hope and struggle actually do work in concert with one another.

So...with that said...how do we maintain "Hope in the struggle?" Well... let's see what instruction the bible will offer us. First, in order to have "Hope in the struggle" you must gain an APPRECIATION for your struggle!__You're telling me to be happy about my struggles? To embrace my struggles? No...not at all! But what I AM saying is that once you have an understanding of the purpose of struggle in your life you will be able to appreciate its end game, thereby giving you a reason to have hope. The bible says in Romans 5:3-5: ³ *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;* ⁴ *perseverance, character; and character, hope.* ⁵ *And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

Suffering has its place in our lives because suffering ultimately leads to hope! Suffering and hope in the same thought! And as an added bonus you learn how to persevere AND you have your character built up in the process. Suffering has utility in our lives.

One morning...and it was a morning riddled with suffering for me...I opened my "Jesus is Calling" Daily devotional by Sarah Young and I got the shock of my life! It said this: *Make friends with the problems in your life...Every problem can teach you something, transforming you little by little into the masterpiece I (God) created you to be...The best way to befriend your problems is to thank God for them...You can even give persistent problems nicknames, helping you to approach them with familiarity rather than with dread!*

This was the jolt I needed while in my struggle! You mean that instead of agonizing over and fighting against my problems and struggles I should make friends with them...thank God for them...and get so acquainted with them that I have a name for them? To some of you that might seem like a concession. Why would I make friends with something that is causing me so much pain...so much frustration? Gaining an appreciation for your struggle is not intended for struggle to have the victory in your life. No...to the contrary...remember...struggle does not exist in this phrase alone! Struggle, according

to Romans, affords us hope that things will work out! But have to always remember that your suffering is intended to make you better. To build you. To make you stronger. And quite honestly, your suffering, in most cases, has very little to do with you but rather how you will use it to help and encourage somebody else. I have had some real hard struggles in my life that while in the midst they were difficult to understand until I met someone else with the same struggle and I was able to use my struggle as a testimony to help them through theirs.

But how...how does suffering ultimately lead us to hope? Well the answer to this leads me to my second point of how hope and struggle co-exist. Not only must you gain an appreciation for your struggle You must also exercise the gift of REMEMBRANCE while in the struggle. Allow me to explain. Throughout the Hebrew bible you have this theme of remembrance. God was always instructing the Children of Israel to remember. Deuteronomy 5:15 says ¹⁵ *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.* Deuteronomy 6:12 goes on to say ¹² *be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

But why...why was God reminding the Children of Israel to remember? You would think that being delivered from 40 years in the wilderness would be an unforgettable experience. Yet...God had to keep reminding the children of Israel to remember how God had brought them out of the wilderness. But why? Well, I maintain it was two-fold. One because they had “proclivities” to fall back into the sinful ways which lead them into the wilderness experience. But secondly, they needed a constant reminder so that they would not give up or give in if faced with future struggles because they could recall or remember how God had delivered them in the past.

And so it is with us. “Remembrance” is a gift from God because when you are in a current struggle you can pull out your mental rolodex and skim through the pages of your previous struggle with a hindsight view knowing that if God delivered you from trouble in the past God has the ability to deliver you from this one! In other words...if God did it before...God can do it again. For there is no shortage of God’s power to help God’s children. God’s track record is solid...unwavering...incomparable! So you...we...can have “Hope in the Struggle” because an omniscient and all-powerful God has proven God’s love for us in the past by bringing us through struggle.

So...to have “Hope in the Struggle” you must first gain an appreciation for the struggle and second you must grab hold to the gift of remembrance. And finally...you absolutely must keep it moving! It is the natural inclination when in deep struggle to retreat...to shut down...to withdraw. It’s easier to stay in isolation when in the struggle over and against keeping it moving. Some fall into depression...while others may turn to alcohol or drugs to numb the pain associated with the struggle. But in verse 1 of our text we see that *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

Now, how easy would it have been for the “Marys” to just stay away from the tomb? After all it represented so much disappointment and pain!! How easy would it have been for them to just throw their hands up and say “its over...let’s just stay home and lament”? How easy would it have been for them to wallow in their sadness and compound it with the negativity and gossip around Jerusalem about how “powerless” their Savior was?

An Unknown Author wrote these wise words: *The only thing wrong with doing nothing is that you never know when you're finished.* Had those sisters just stayed home...wallowing in their sorrow they would have never known that their suffering was over that hope had been fulfilled. They would have never known that their Savior had risen had conquered death and that the prophesy had been fulfilled that in 3 days he would be raised from the grave!

You MUST get busy so you will know when your struggle is over! You must continue to be about your Father’s business! And believe me...I’m not telling you to do something I haven’t done myself! I’ve been through some serious struggles in my life...caring for a sick mother. Losing both of my parents to the same vicious disease within 2 years of each other. And a host of other devastating life challenges. Yet...even in the midst of my struggles...I maintained a hope in Christ that propelled me to keep it moving. And if doing it for myself wasn’t enough I had my children to consider, a congregation watching how I would respond to my struggles to consider. So not keeping it moving was not an option for me and it’s not an option for you! So while you strive for hope in the struggle...keep it moving.

And this is my final challenge to you. However hope manifest itself in your struggle. Whether you’ve gained an appreciation for your struggle. Whether you’ve tapped into your gift of remembrance. Whether you’ve abandoned idleness and chosen the route of keeping it moving. My final challenge to you is that once you get on the other side of the struggle. Once you feel the freedom associated with the end of it..my final challenge to you is that you, as with those who struggled through the crucifixion of Jesus but who also bore witness to the resurrection, that you will both run and joyfully tell others of God’s miraculous work in your life. And that you will then worship him, giving praise and thanksgiving for how God brought you out of the struggle.

For the end of our text in Matthew 28 says...⁸ *So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.* ⁹ *Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.*

TO LEARN MORE

**Join a Small Group – call the church office for times and location
510/657-3133**

To learn and encourage one another

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

- 1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal
Romans 3:23**
- 2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death
Romans 6:23**
- 3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us
Romans 8:5**
- 4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow
Him to become the master of our life
Romans 10:13**

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."