AMAZING GRACE

“Hopeful By Grace”
Pastor Ken Larson

Here in the Detroit area we are fortunate to have a number of high quality museums like the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Museum of African-American History, the Henry Ford and Greenfield Village. Such institutions preserve important artifacts from our shared history and help us remember where we came from and those who formed our culture. A week ago Laurie and I toured “Hitsville USA” on Grand Avenue in Detroit. It is the birthplace of the “Motown” music empire. There you find a step by step chronicle of how entrepreneur Berry Gordy helped develop so many talented African-American singers, musicians and songwriters in the 1960s, most of whom were from Detroit.

Hitsville USA is symbol of success. Most museums preserve the record of people or ideas or inventions that had an enormous impact. But did you know that Ann Arbor is home to a very different kind of gallery? It goes by the informal name of the ”Museum of Failed Products.” It has aisles and shelves that make it look like supermarket, but there’s only one of each item. These products were withdrawn from sale after only a few weeks because nobody wanted to buy them. It is the graveyard of consumer capitalism. In addition to caffeinated beer, TV dinners branded with the name “Colgate” (who wants to buy food from a toothpaste company?), self-heating soup cans that blew up, and breath mint packets that look like packages of crack cocaine you will find Clairol’s “A Touch of Yogurt” shampoo, an empty bottle of Pepsi AM Breakfast Cola, Fortune Snookies – which were fortune cookies for dogs, and McSpaghetti (from McDonald’s). I can understand why these failed. The list of product failures far outweighs the successes. (O. Burkeman, The Antidote, Faber & Faber, 2012; M. Symonds, "Why MBAs, and B-Schools, Need to Embrace Failure,” Bloomberg, 7-2-12)

On a spring Sunday morning in the year 30 AD, everyone in the vicinity of Jerusalem who was at all aware of what had happened over the previous few days would have concluded that the carpenter-turned-preacher from Nazareth named Jesus was a colossal failure. His movement was as dead in the water as he was in the tomb. His fame and popularity had risen meteorically to unheard of heights, but then it came crashing to earth as Jesus’ cross was raised into place on the barren hilltop of Golgotha. On that morning his story would not have merited even a footnote in the history of Israel. Many of his disciples were in hiding, fearful that the same hostile forces that had schemed to have Jesus crucified were out for their blood, too.

Later that day, though, two of his followers were on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. We heard their story earlier today when it was read from Luke 24.13-35. One was named Cleopas and the other is never identified. Whether it was a friend or spouse or child, we’ll never know. We do know that as they walked along the path they were engaged in conversation about the recent demise of their leader that had left them grieving, questioning, and wondering. I can imagine that they were asking themselves, “How did this happen? It seemed like everything was going so smoothly. Just a week ago crowds cheered for Jesus and waved palm branches as he rode into the city. The atmosphere was electric and we expected good things to happen. All week long he was in the city, at or near the Temple, teaching, dialoguing, debating with his enemies who were always trying to paint him into a corner so they could portray him as just another troublemaker. Then came Gethsemane and the trials, the beating and the cross – and now he’s gone. How could God let such a good man come to such a deplorable ending?”

It was not a happy time, and then they were joined by a stranger, someone they didn’t recognize. Cleopas and his companion must have thought this man had been locked away in a cave somewhere because he asked what they were talking about. His questions stopped the travelers in their tracks, their faces cast toward the dirt. If you had walked the streets of New York City on September 12, 2001 and acted as if they knew nothing of the jets that slammed into the World Trade Center the day before, you’d have thought they just dropped in from Mars. That’s how the two men reacted and so they asked, “Are you the only person who doesn’t know about the things that have happened around here?” To which the stranger said, “What things?”

To answer that question, Cleopas began to talk about Jesus. Obviously he didn’t know what we do, that he was in fact talking to the same Jesus who had that morning been raised from the dead by the power of God’s hand. I wonder how hard it was for Christ to listen to his explanation and not reveal who he was. He did remain silent as his follower described him this way:

- He and many others regarded Jesus as a prophet. For a first century Jew that was no small statement. Immediately it put the Nazarene preacher in the same company with Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah – gigantic figures in the history of their people. A prophet was someone close to God through whom the Almighty spoke.
• Jesus had done and said powerful things. Everything was done out in the open where everyone could examine and investigate Christ’s teaching and miraculous healings. Even those who hated him could not deny the power he displayed.

• Though his followers believed he was the long-awaited Messiah who would deliver their people from oppression, he was cruelly executed through the collusion of the Jews’ own leaders. That meant their hope was gone.

• Though some women had gone to the tomb that very morning and reported it empty, even saying that angels proclaimed Jesus to be alive. Others went to the grave and found that it was indeed vacant, but the prophet was nowhere to be found – alive or dead.

Those two men on the road were headed toward a destination, but in another sense they didn’t know where they were going. They had just lost their leader, their focus in life, their sense of purpose. Most importantly, though, they had lost their hope. It must have been agonizing for Cleopas to say, “...but we had hoped that he was the one…” (verse 21). They had never encountered anyone like Jesus. He explained life as no one ever had. He demonstrated power that no one could match. In his presence the world, life, God – it all made sense, it all connected. And that gave people hope for the future despite their circumstances. The folks who followed him had nothing in terms of worldly goods, but he had lit a fire in their hearts that burned bright…until the previous Friday when he was nailed to a cross and died. And that’s when their hope died.

Hope is a terrible thing to live without. You can endure almost anything, put up with troubles, fight your way through suffering and obstacles as long as there is hope for change, for getting better, for a different kind of future. But when hope is gone all you have left is what you can see.

Levi and I watched the Michigan Wolverines take on the Kansas Jayhawks in the NCAA basketball tournament the other night. For about 35 minutes everything was going Kansas’ way; with only 7 minutes left they were up by 14 points. Then Michigan made a few baskets. With that spark Laurie asked, “Do you think they can come back and win?” Truthfully, I didn’t have much hope for a Wolverine win, but then there were a few more baskets, a missed foul shot, a miracle three pointer, and an eventual triumph in overtime. Those players kept going because there was always a chance if they didn’t give up. They had to believe in their skills, their teammates, and what they had practiced all season long. As long as there was time on the clock there was hope.

What gives you hope? Are you encouraged because the stock market has climbed back up since the crash of 2007? Are you more optimistic since the auto companies are making money rather than bleeding cash every quarter? We hear about the North Koreans threatening war, but since we have the most powerful military in the world we probably think our future is secure. When we get sick we put our trust in medical technology which continues to make tremendous strides. If you are just starting out in life are you hopeful about finding a relationship that will turn into a lifelong commitment? Every two years we step into the voting booth to elect political leaders hoping they can find solutions to the vexing problems facing our nation. There is some validity to all these sources of hope, but are they enough to build your life around? What if they don’t pan out? What then?

In one of his books author Os Guinness wrote about a 19th century Japanese poet known as Issa. When he was young his mother died – just the first of many tragedies in his life, including the death of a daughter. Many years and many sorrows later Issa, who was a Buddhist, went to a Zen master for comfort. He reminded Issa that Buddhism teaches the world is an illusion – like the morning dew our lives will evaporate with the rising sun. When he returned home he penned the following words:

The world is dew— / The world is dew— / and yet, / and yet …

Though this man was a Buddhist, there was tension in him that longed for something else. To say in the face of deep tragedy, “Don’t worry, your life and everyone else’s is just an illusion that will evaporate like the morning dew” wasn’t enough. That is a formula for hopelessness and despair.

For 20 centuries the church of Jesus Christ has gathered on Easter Sunday to proclaim, “Christ is rise, he is risen indeed.” As one preacher put it, we don’t come to say, “The stock market has risen, it has risen indeed…The gross domestic product has risen, it has risen indeed…My stock portfolio has risen, it has risen indeed” (J. Ortberg, sermon “Resurrection: Metaphor or Miracle?” Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, 4-12-09) We need something more than ourselves or what we have or what we might achieve to base our hope on. We need something more solid and dependable, something that can’t be taken away or eroded or lost despite failing health or economic downturns or political chaos.

That’s exactly what Cleopas and his friend needed on the road to Emmaus, so their traveling companion began to speak. He started in a surprising fashion by saying, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” (verse 25). This was like a slap in the face! This man they thought was a total stranger as much as said, “Wake up, fellas! You know what the Scriptures teach – don’t you believe all of it?” From there he went on to
explain to them how in the clearest possible way, all through what we call the Old Testament, God laid out a hope for his people that was embodied in a coming deliverer, a Messiah, who would not only draw people toward their Creator, but in the process have to suffer. He showed them, probably by using passages like Isaiah 53, Psalms 22 and 118, Daniel 7 and others how his coming, his ministry, and even his gruesome death was all there in the record. Jesus helped these men see that his life and death was not a surprise but part of God’s plan all along. As Cleopas and his friend listened, a new flame began to burn in their hearts.

When they arrived at their destination Jesus made like he was going to go on, but since it was late in the day they insisted that he stay with them for the night. Offering hospitality was a cardinal virtue in that culture. So Jesus agreed to stay. They went into the house, sat down at a table. Jesus took bread, gave thanks, then broke it and offered it to them. That’s when it happened. I can’t say this with certainty, but I have a hunch that all along the road as they talked, Jesus’ wounds from the crucifixion were covered by his robes. Then, when he took the bread and offered it to the two men, they could see the nail marks in his wrists — and it hit them. Their eyes bug out, their jaws drop open, and in an instant they know — the reports from the tomb were true, Jesus was alive and had been with them all day. Then in a flash he was gone — possible because his resurrected body was no longer subject to the normal limitations of time and space. Can you imagine those two looking at each other, awestruck at what they had experienced and what they now knew, that Jesus’ enemies and Pilate and the soldiers, and most importantly, the grave, didn’t get the last word. They realized that the burning they felt in their hearts as Jesus explained what happened, putting all the pieces together. Now they had hope again. Jesus was even greater than they thought — to call him just a prophet was far too tame. He was the Messiah who had conquered death. Everything he told them was true. Though the hour was late this news was too good to keep to themselves, so they hoofed it back to Jerusalem and found the other disciples of Jesus. But before they could get a word out of their mouths the others blurt out, “It is true. The Lord has risen…” Then the two from Emmaus told them their story, further confirming the unbelievable good news of the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead confirms everything he said and did. He is the Son of God who came to reveal our Creator to us as no one could. He did die on the cross, taking on the penalty for our sins so that we can be forgiven. He does give hope to everyone who believes. This hope is about eternity, but it’s also about today, for Jesus is very much in the business of touching and changing lives here and now. He invites us to follow him and join a movement which is bigger than any of us — bigger than me, my story, my circumstances, my problems or what I can do or accomplish. He summons us to be part of what God is doing in this world that he is intent to reclaim.

What does this mean for you and me? In the coming weeks we’ll explore that in a new series that will focus on what happened to the first followers of Jesus as recorded for us in the book of Acts. This is the “Resurrection Effect” that is all about how people like you and me find joy, hope, and courage in the company of Jesus. I hope you’ll come along to discover it with us.

Several years ago researchers in England went door-to-door asking people about their belief in God. One of their questions was, "Do you believe in a God who intervenes in human history, who changes the course of affairs, who performs miracles, etc.?” One man who was asked that question answered, "No, I don't believe in that God; I believe in the ordinary God." (A. Mohler, Words from the Fire, Moody, 2009)

Who do you believe in? Some “ordinary god” or the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? He is the Creator of the universe and who sent his Son to be born in Bethlehem’s manger. This is the One who walked the hills of Galilee, healed the sick and changed people’s lives. He is the One who sacrificed his life on our behalf and offers us forgiveness and freedom. He is the only One who can give us a hope that is good for today and tomorrow and all eternity. He is the One who rose from the dead and his name is Jesus. CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!