



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

COMPLICATED CELEBRATIONS

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ APRIL 14, 2024

In fifth grade, I reached the pinnacle of my athletic career. It was the final inning of the Apponaug Babe Ruth Baseball Minor League Championship Game. The score was tied. The bases were loaded. And Steve Clark was up to bat. The pitch came, and I swung, and something unusual happened: I hit the ball! That would not be a common occurrence for the rest of my baseball career. As soon as they introduced curve balls, I entered early retirement. But this day, I hit the ball into right field and reached second base for a double. Two runners scored. In the bottom of the inning, we would hold the lead and pull out the victory. We celebrated our championship victory with singing and hot dogs and throwing our gloves and hats in the air. But for me, there was one critical thing missing: my dad wasn't there.

My dad was a single parent, and he was almost always present at my games. But it just so happened that the day of the annual Clark family reunion in Pennsylvania was the same day as my baseball game in Rhode Island. My dad had tried to make both work but the schedules wound up clashing, so my family flew out to Philadelphia the morning before I became a hero. I was incredibly happy, of course. But I was also kind of sad. It was a complicated celebration.

You might know what a complicated celebration feels like. You went to a birthday party and there was someone there you didn't get along with; it was fun, but awkward at the same time. Mother's Day can be complicated if you don't have any children, but you've always wanted to have at least one. A wedding can be complicated if the bride is your ex-girlfriend. Truthfully, many of our celebrations

can be complicated. Yesterday, I celebrated my 30th birthday. Don't worry if you didn't bring me a gift; you can next week. But as some of you know that it was a complicated celebration for me. My dad wasn't there for this one; we buried him a month ago after he lost his battle with heart failure. It's a complicated celebration for me because, for the first time, I am without either of my parents. Celebrations can be complex, and maybe the most complicated can be the celebration of Easter.

The Christian celebration of Easter isn't just a Sunday, but a season. Easter, in the Christian calendar, is seven weeks long. If you've been to another church that is a bit more formal than ours where the pastor wore a robe, he might have worn a white robe or a white stole with his robe for the seven weeks after Easter; white is the color of resurrection. On Easter, we celebrate that Jesus rose and defeated death, therefore offering eternal life to anyone who believes in Him. We celebrate that Jesus is alive right now! He is still resurrecting dead things in people's lives. Jesus' resurrection can begin to change our lives now. Addictive habits, sinful lifestyles, broken relationships: all these things can begin to be healed right now because the resurrection power of Jesus is breaking into the world today. But it's still complicated when you're celebrating Easter and there is one less seat at your dinner table for the first time. Or you're celebrating how Jesus rose from the dead but there is still a dead relationship in your past.

For those of us whose lives feel broken, Easter might be complicated. Jesus rose from the dead, but he hasn't fixed my broken relationship. Jesus rose from the dead, but he hasn't healed my sinful habit. Jesus rose from the dead, but he won't heal my best friend. How are we supposed to celebrate resurrection when there are things in our lives that still feel dead?

To help us wrestle with that question, I want to look at a complicated celebration from about 3000 years ago. If there's something dead in your life that's making Easter complicated, I invite you to listen along as I read Psalm 42.

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation ⁶ and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.

⁸ By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?”

¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me all the day long,

“Where is your God?”

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

This psalm gives us a model for how to respond when we’re facing complicated celebrations—like an Easter season with something broken in your life. Here is the model the writer gives us:

1. Confront God’s Absence
2. Remember God’s Promises
3. Hope in God’s Deliverance

We’ll start with the first: confront God’s absence. Let’s imagine this scene. You’re about to board the plane to go home for your favorite family holiday—let’s say it’s Thanksgiving back in Michigan. You’re texting your parents or kids, all excited to go back and see them when that dreaded seven-letter word pops up on the screen... **Delayed.** A late November ice storm which is why you moved to Florida. Why did you plan Thanksgiving in Michigan!? After a few more delays, the inevitable happens: your flight is canceled. You miss Thanksgiving. Your family gathers and celebrates like normal... without you. Have you ever been there?

We can’t be completely sure, but it seems like that might be what’s happening to the writer of our psalm today. Verse 4 helps us get a handle on what might be going on:

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival!

Festivals like the Feast of Tabernacles or the Passover were Jewish holidays like our Christmas or Thanksgiving. The family would gather, people would take time off work, and there would be special rituals and traditions. But now, for whatever reason, this writer can’t go to the temple where the festivals are celebrated. Perhaps it’s the

day of one of his favorite holidays, and it's all the worse because he can't celebrate with his family and friends. He's alone and feels as if God has abandoned him. It's an especially complicated celebration because it sounds like everyone else still gets to go. But notice that he does not say God has a reason for everything or that someone else has it worse than he. Rather, he *confronts* God about his pain. Listen to some of the things he writes: His soul pants for God! When can he go meet God? His tears have been his food.

It might sound strange that confronting God's absence is something the Bible models for us, but that's what these complicated psalms were all about. Many psalms were written as worship songs to be sung by believers in God, not unlike our hymnbook. But our hymn this morning was "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" not "God, O God, Why Have You Forgotten Me!" The psalm we just read was a special type of worship song called a *lament*. Laments are a way of saying to God, "Why are you letting this happen to me!? Aren't you in control? This is your fault!"

We keep our distance from this idea in the modern Western church. Sometimes we think it's not good to be upset with God or to tell God what we really think. We pretend to have everything together. But in ancient Israel's psalms, the writers had no problem calling God out. If we were to summarize the writer's complaint, it's this: he feels that God didn't show up to work today. God is far away. He can't find God. He can't worship God. The point of a lament psalm meant to be sung by a community is that they have all probably felt this way, too.

We don't have many lament songs today. The closest things we have are "breakup songs." Teenagers know what I'm talking about. You went through a tough breakup, and then you heard Taylor Swift singing "We Are Never Ever, Ever Getting Back Together" and you relate to it! It felt like Taylor wrote that song about your relationship! Suddenly, you're listening to it over and over, and it becomes your "breakup song." That's what a lament is supposed to be. It is a way to give words to deep emotions. If you're a follower of

Jesus, there have probably been times when you felt the way this writer did. “God, where are you? Why aren’t you answering my prayers?”

We don’t know what was behind the writing of this psalm. Maybe the writer was sick; maybe he had been taken into exile by enemy warriors; maybe it was King David running away from his son during a military coup. We aren’t sure because we aren’t supposed to know. We’re supposed to put our name into the song. There is probably some area in your life that seems like God didn’t show up. There is a dying relative, a broken relationship, a complicated celebration, or an addictive habit. We just celebrated Easter, the good news that Jesus rose from the dead and is on a mission to heal the world—but for some reason, God forgot to bless this area of your life.

It’s like being in a power outage and watching the power come on for your neighbors across the street who are on a different grid while your power is still off. Other people are getting power. You know the electricity crews are at work and can restore power, so why hasn’t it happened for you when it has for others? Laments were written to give us a voice for those feelings. I spent a lot of time in the lament psalms when my dad was dying. That permitted me to be confused and even frustrated at God—because the writers of the Bible felt that way, too. To acknowledge what’s dead in your life on Easter is not a lack of faith. It’s a *lament* of faith.

But after confronting God, where we do go next? That’s the next thing, the second point, that the writer addresses in his lament: remember God’s promises. Look at verse 5: “*Why are you cast down, O my soul? ...Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.*” This refrain is a microcosm of the rest of the psalm; it’s full of tension. On one hand, his soul is “cast down”—literally bent over. Things are hard and sad, and he doesn’t understand. But on the other hand, God is good. God is his salvation. My life is broken; my God is good. In the next few verses, we hear the writer trying to make sense of those two truths. Get ready: it’s a roller coaster.

In verse 6, he writes: *“My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.”* Just in case it’s been a little while since your Middle Eastern geography class, let’s get a map out. Jerusalem is where the temple of God was and where the writer longed to be. This writer says he is remembering God from the land of “Hermon.” Mount Hermon, the largest mountain in Israel, was at the far north boundary of the nation... slightly over 100 miles away. That’s not bad, right? That’s just like a two-hour trip to Miami on Alligator Alley. But imagine you’ve got to make a trip to Miami next weekend...and you have to **walk**. That’s what we’re talking about! Mount Hermon was the single furthest place from Jerusalem in the entire country of Israel and for some unknown reason, that’s where our poor writer was.

The worst part of all is that it’s God’s fault! God, after all, is in control of everything. In verse 7, the writer lets God have it. *“All your breakers and your waves have gone over me!”* The God who loved and blessed him is the same One who seems to have abandoned him and caused his despair. It’s God’s fault. Then, he swings all the way back in verse 8: *“By day the LORD commands his steadfast love; and at night his song is with me.”*

The word translated as “steadfast love” is a special Hebrew word: *hesed* which translates as “covenant love” or “steadfast love.” It’s the word God uses to talk about his promises to his people. In the book of Exodus, God said he would pass before Moses and tell Moses his name. God called himself, *“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in hesed”* (Ex 34:6). At the moment God declared his name before Moses saying, “This is who I am,” he chose to call himself the God of *hesed*. The God of steadfast love. It is as if the writer were saying, “Although I don’t *feel* steadfast love, I know you still *are* steadfast love.” His pain leads to a deeper relationship with and trust in God.

A few days ago, we had a solar eclipse. In Florida, you might not have noticed as the sun is bright here no matter how much is covered. But if you were watching online from Ohio, upstate New York,

or Vermont, you might have had a different experience. Around 3 PM, it might suddenly have gotten very dark and very cold. The stars may have come out. The birds stopped singing. Thousands of years ago when eclipses like this happened, as you can imagine, it was terrifying for people. In 585 BC, a solar eclipse occurred during a war between the Medes and the Lydians. They interpreted it as such a bad omen that they laid down their arms and negotiated a peace treaty ending a war that had gone on for years. If you didn't know better, you would have been terrified—The sun is gone! The gods must be angry!

But here's the thing—you *do* know better! You have the internet! You know that the sun didn't disappear, it was just covered by the moon for a little while. But when God gets eclipsed from our lives, it feels a bit different. One writer, Jon Bloom, told of a time when he felt as this psalm writer did. He felt that God was far away and had abandoned him and that his prayers weren't working. He compared his experience to a solar eclipse: "An eclipse of God," he called it. Ancient Christian writers called this experience "The Dark Night of the Soul."

Moments like what this psalm writer was going through can feel like a solar eclipse of our soul. When we lose loved ones, lose treasured relationships, or go through seasons when God feels far away, it can feel like God has gone missing. The reality is that He has just been eclipsed by what is happening in our lives. He's still there! *It just feels and looks like He's gone*, and the world is darker and colder. What do we do then, during a soul eclipse? In this writer's case, he chose to remember God's character: "I don't feel Your steadfast love, but I know You are steadfast love."

We might summarize the psalm by saying, "When you don't understand what God is doing, remember who God is." For us, if this Easter feels complicated, we might look at Romans 8:11.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who

dwells in you.

Even if your life doesn't feel resurrected, you believe in the God who resurrects the dead. He still can resurrect your broken life, your broken relationship, your broken body. He's not done resurrecting.

That's the end of Psalm 42. But the psalm isn't quite over. Psalm 43 carries some very similar language to the point that most scholars think Psalms 42 and 43 were originally one psalm and the numbers were added later. So, having confronted God and having remembered God, let's read these last 5 verses, found in Psalm 43, to see what else the psalmist invites us to do.

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people,
from the deceitful and unjust man
deliver me!

² For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you rejected me?

Why do I go about mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?

³ Send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling!

⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy,
and I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Confront God, remember God, and finally, hope in God. In Hebrew, the words "hope" and "wait" are interchangeable. "Hoping" in God is essentially the same as "waiting" for God. Notice in 43:3 the writer doesn't say he's going to figure out how to find God if he

just does the right spiritual practices or gets back to the temple; rather, God's "light and truth" will find *him*. God is the one who will be taking action. The writer of one commentary called God's light and truth a "search party." In the New Testament story of the lost sheep, it's not the lost sheep who realizes he needs to go home; it is the shepherd who goes out hunting for the sheep. Christian writer Henri Nouwen wrote, "I no longer think of God as hiding out and making it as difficult as possible for me to find him, but, instead, as the one who is looking for me while I am doing the hiding."

Something in your life is dead. You crave resurrection. But could it be that, as much as you want God to heal it, you want to hide it? Is the broken relationship not just painful, but shrouded in shame? Is the illness of a loved one not just sadness, but also fear at how you'll ever cope when they have passed? What if instead of hiding from you, God is the one on the hunt for you? It's by reassuring himself of God's character that the writer can confidently say in verse 4 that God would bring him home. It's the same for us. When something in our life feels un-resurrectable, the only antidote is to put our hope in the one who raises the dead.

This leads us to the main point of the whole sermon: When you don't understand God's plan, trust in God's character. Specifically, for those who are having a complicated Easter and something in your life looks like it's dead, put your hope in the God who raises the dead. He's done it before. He can do it again. But what if he doesn't do it? God can raise from the dead so why is the person you love gone? Why should you bother to hope in the one who can raise the dead, if you don't know for sure that he will?"

To answer, let's picture the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives is a hill that overlooks the city of Jerusalem; it is the same spot where Jesus was arrested the night before his death. There's something unique about this Jewish cemetery—all the graves are facing the same direction. All the buried bodies have their feet pointing toward the Temple in the city of Jerusalem. There is an old Jewish religious text that promised when the Messiah, God's

anointed, the Savior of Humankind, came to earth, the Resurrection of the dead would take place. And the Resurrection would begin at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. If you were buried on the Mount of Olives with your feet facing the temple, all you would have to do is stand up and walk a short distance to meet the Messiah! Talk about prime real estate! Joking aside, I love this imagery. A person's last action of their dying body was to place their hope in the Resurrection: "the Messiah hasn't resurrected me yet, but he will."

On the last full day of my dad's life, he preached his most powerful sermon, and it only took five words: "Everything I believed is true." Trusting in the promise of resurrection when your body is breaking down, that's clinging to hope in the face of death. He wouldn't be healed...yet; but he sure would be one day. Like the bodies buried with their feet pointed toward the temple, the resurrection hasn't happened yet, but death doesn't have the final say.

This is why Easter is key for followers of Jesus. We believe the Messiah has come. He did go to the Temple. The Resurrection has happened, and because of that, it will happen for us. Christianity hinges on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we have a nice, moralistic religion that teaches us to be kind and loving to people. That's it. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we have no reason to hope God will raise us from the dead, or to raise any broken thing in our lives from the dead. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:19, "*If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*" That is if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, people should feel bad for Christians because they are hoping in a shadow. But Paul goes on in verse 20, "*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*" It is because God raised Jesus that we can trust God will raise us. If he doesn't raise what is broken in your life on this side of eternity, you can trust that he will raise it one day because that's who he is.

So, what's the case for you? Has God been eclipsed in your life? Has part of your life remained in the dark when it seems like God promised the power would come back on? How do we

celebrate a season of resurrection when something in our lives is dead? Let's remember our writer's three ideas.

1. Confront God's absence. Be honest with God and yourself about where he seems to have gone missing. You might find and pray a lament psalm; you might take time to journal or simply tell a friend. It starts with acknowledgment.
2. Remember God's promises. We are prone to forget. Maybe you find one promise about resurrection, and you stick it to your mirror or your fridge to remind you of that truth daily.
3. Hope in God's deliverance—even when it seems improbable.

Dad's burial plot was in Pennsylvania, not the Mount of Olives. So, we did the next best thing. Dad was a bit more traditional than I am; he always preached wearing his pastoral robe, including a special stole he wore on the robe to symbolize the color of the church year. White was the color for Easter; so, he always wore white at funerals. It symbolized that, though death had happened, it wouldn't have the last word. We buried Dad with that white stole that he wore for 39 years of ministry. Though his body went into a grave, it went to the grave clinging to the hope of resurrection just as he had on earth. What was dead in his life—and ours—hasn't been resurrected yet, but it will be one day.

How might you cling to hope in the face of your own "soul eclipse"? How might you be a person of hope in a world of anxiety and darkness? God may not have fixed your problems yet. He may not heal your broken relationship now. He might not save your loved one from dying on earth. But if you believe in the God who raises the dead, you believe in the God who will wipe away every tear, end every war, cast out every fear, and restore what was broken. You can trust that the God who raises the dead will raise what is dead in your life, too—in this life, or in the next. ■