

CHOOSING HOPE

John 20:1-18

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How important is hope? Is it possible that hope is absolutely necessary for survival?

On August 5, 2010, the San Jose Mine in Chile collapsed, trapping 33 miners inside. They at first assumed they would be rescued in a few hours or days. The men immediately retreated to a room in the mine called the Refuge, a classroom-size, steel-reinforced safe room that held provisions meant to feed 25 men for two days.

The inventory of the food included 1 can of salmon, 1 can of peaches, 1 can of peas, 18 cans of tuna, 24 liters of condensed milk (8 of which were spoiled), 93 packages of cookies, and some expired medicines. There were also ten bottles of water, not counting the vats of industrial water which was dirty and oily. Food rationing, they soon learned, would be harsh, since, as one of them wrote later, "If each man eats one or two cookies and a spoonful of tuna each day, the provisions might stretch out a week."

Each day, a miner named Mario Sepúlveda would line up 33 plastic cups in rows and spoon one teaspoon of canned fish into each cup, then pour in some water, making a broth. He then passed out two cookies to each man. 'Enjoy your meal,' he said. That single meal, at noon, likely contained fewer than 300 calories and was meant to hold them all until the next noon.

They soon broadened the menu to include soup they'd cook, using the industrial water, in a truck's air filter from a single can of tuna, with . . . no salt and only a few peas and some motor oil for flavoring.

In time, the rumbling of their collective stomachs grew so loud that, in the echo of the mine, some thought it was the sound of the mountain collapsing.

The men would not be rescued in a few days, though, because they were trapped under a piece of mountain that had broken off, a giant rock as tall as a 45-story building.

The Chilean media put the miners' chances for survival at "less than 2%." Eventually, there was just enough food to give each man one cookie every two days. Then they stretched that out to three days to make the food last longer. At one point, "a single slice of peach, about the size of a thumb" was found, and meticulously divided into 33 slivers "about the size of a fingernail."

One phase of their ordeal ended at seventeen days when a drill bit punctured the surface of their room, creating a passageway through which they could receive food, clean water, and other supplies, and providing a means of communicating with their loved ones.

Though these miners came from all over Chile, their relatives were all close by at this point. They had all gathered at the mine when they heard about the disaster, and they were living in a makeshift camp they named Camp Hope.

But drilling a hole was one thing; rescuing the men safely was another. It would take another 52 days, but all 33 men were eventually rescued, after spending 69 days underground.

The men survived not as individuals but as a community, looking after each other, encouraging one another. At one point, early on, they decided that before their meager meal each day, they would pray. Jose Henriquez served as their designated pastor. He would pray, "We aren't the best men, but Lord, consider this moment of difficulty of ours. We need you. We want you to make us stronger and help us." Each prayer meeting included a time for the men to apologize to each other. "I'm sorry I raised my voice. I'm sorry I didn't help get the water." They faced harrowing physical, mental, emotional, spiritual challenges, but they faced them together. They had their own Camp Hope far underground. And on October 12, they all emerged from the darkness into the light. I don't think I'm overstating things to say that they would not have survived without hope, and without their spiritual practices.

How important is hope? The story of Easter is the story of the triumph of hope. Jesus lived with hope. Jesus believed that this world is worth saving. This world. Not some perfect place, but this world, the world Jesus inhabited, with its corrupt Roman emperor, with its self-righteous religious officials, with its bickering disciples. This world, and every individual in it, deserves love - the tax collector, the prostitute, the person with leprosy. Living with hope means living as if the world is worth saving, as if every person is worthy of love. That's how Jesus lived, and it was too much for his enemies to take. Because that kind of hope can't be contained or controlled. It threatened those in power. And they thought they'd killed the spirit of hope. But it rose again. It rose again.

Hope is still rising. Our friend Anil Henry looked at an old mission hospital, practically abandoned. He saw ramshackle buildings, outdated equipment, and disheartened personnel. He also saw a place worth saving and people in need of love and healing. The Henry family arrived in Mungeli, India, in June 2003. It was monsoon season and their house had no roof. The campus was completely dark except for three bare light bulbs on the corners of one building. There were no screens. Snakes and mosquitoes were everywhere. There was no phone system, no mattresses, no linens. In 12 years, he has constructed new buildings, started a cancer center, started a nursing school and graduated its first class, completely revamped the school next door and the neighboring church, and attracted topnotch personnel from around the world. It's incredibly hard work. He does it because he lives in hope.

A friend of mine has been living with liver and pancreatic cancer for two years, working full-time, and telling only a handful of people about his disease. He's growing tired, but he recently agreed to join a research study which will require him to travel every other week. It probably will not be of any help to him, but it's likely to help people in the future. He told me, "I'm not thrilled about the time element or the drive, but I think it's the right thing to do." Why? He lives in hope. He believes the world is worth saving and all its people worthy of love.

You see, Easter is not just about one time and one person. Easter is about the power of living in hope. I chose our middle hymn for today because of one line. It says, "Christ is risen; we are risen." If we believe that Easter is the triumph of life over death, of joy over fear, of hope over despair, then we believe it not just for Jesus but for ourselves as well.

I know there are a thousand reasons to feel badly about the state of the world. Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabab in Kenya, climate change, a young pilot committing suicide and mass murder. But let us not give in to despair. This world is worth saving. The writer Rob Bell defines despair this way: “Despair is the belief that tomorrow is going to be the same as today.” Despair is throwing up our hands and giving up. Despair is turning off the news and burying our heads in the sand. Despair is the belief that things are too far gone. Despair is the admission that God is no longer present in this world.

The Roman officials didn’t want the world to change for the better. They wanted their personal circumstances to be better; they wanted to have more wealth and power for themselves. So when Jesus said “Blessed are the poor,” they felt threatened. When Jesus said there will be a time when everything will be reversed, when the poor will be lifted up, and the last will be first, and the hungry filled with good things, Rome said, “No. We’re killing that message.” And they thought they knew what the future would be like after they crucified Jesus. They thought that Saturday and Sunday and Monday would be days just like every other day, now that Jesus was gone. Finally their power and authority would be unthreatened. But Jesus’ ideas lived on. His followers didn’t have his charisma, but they were given the gift of the Holy Spirit instead, an enthusiasm and a sense of caring about one another that proved to be infectious.

Hope is believing that tomorrow can be better than today, because the world is worth saving, and people are worthy of our love. Hope is living as if that world-saving, people-loving work is the work of our lifetimes, work we are equipped to take on, thanks

to the example of Jesus, the path he has shown us, the spiritual gifts we receive, and the support we give one another in the community of faith.

Is there bad news in the world today? Of course there is. But saving the world and loving the world's people are pursuits that give our lives meaning and purpose and joy. They help us rise, above our fears, above despair, and out of any tombs in which we find ourselves buried.

Christ is risen. We are risen. Let us embrace the gift of new life and live with hope!