

"The Hope of Easter"

Jeremiah 29:11

April 5, 2015 - 11:00 AM -Dr. Jack Graham

[Dr. Graham, message, "The Hope of Easter"]

There's a theme here. It's all about comebacks! The Savior who came back from death to life, and the One who's coming back again one day soon!

It occurred to me as I was driving up early this morning, dark-thirty sometime. It was raining... hard, but it occurred to me that it was forty years ago that I became pastor of a church in Oklahoma... Hobart, Oklahoma, small town. A wonderful experience being there and I was there 1975. And it occurred to me that I've been bringing this message of the resurrection on Easter for forty consecutive years! [applause] That's a streak! I'm keeping that streak alive (ha!). You know, Kentucky couldn't quite get to 40 and 0, but I have, alright! [laughter] It doesn't mean the sermon was always a winner but the message is! The message is a winning message: it's the message of hope. We do bring this message that we bring year after year, and really week after week. It is the message of Jesus Christ; His death, His burial, His resurrection.

I heard about a little boy who was on his way to church early with his family and... maybe a rainy day, cloudy like this one, and he was a little grumpy. He was a little upset that he was having to go... cranky that he was having to go to church. He said, "I don't know why we go to church on Easter anyway! It's the same old story every year and the same ending!" [laughter] Aren't you glad we have the same ending every year! Jesus is alive! [applause]

The title of the message is "The Hope of Easter", and the Scripture is found today in Jeremiah 29:11. Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the best and most beloved of all scriptures. We quote it at graduations as well as funerals. We've marked it... many of us have memorized it, we share it those who are discouraged, those who are depressed, who need a word of encouragement, and yes, it is a message of hope. Jeremiah 29:11 says this:

11) *"But I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for wholeness (and that word is shalom... peace, wholeness) and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."*

Because Jesus lives, we have a future and a hope with Him! He has delivered and conquered death! And therefore, we live in hope!

Now hope, of course, is essential for life. You wouldn't live very long in hopelessness. It's a lifeline. What oxygen is to the lungs, hope is to the

soul. The Bible tells us that hope is an anchor for the soul. What an anchor is to a ship, hope is to the soul.

You might be interested to know that one of the earliest Christian symbols was an anchor. There certainly was the symbol of the cross, there was even the symbol of the fish, the *ichthus* that early Christians etched in the ground to express their faith. But the anchor was an early symbol of the Christian faith. It was an adjusted cross in one sense, and they often put it... etched it in the rocks and the tombs of the catacombs where Christians went underground, had their Bible studies and worship services. It's written in the tombs, it's written in the rocks... these anchors of hope. Hope, an anchor for the soul! Because an anchor provides security and steadiness in the midst of a storm.

Certainty... that's what hope is. Hope is the certainty... the security that our future... because of the resurrection our future as believers is in His hands. And because of Easter, because Jesus is alive we have this incredible hope and future. And that means when your future may seem uncertain... it means that when your dreams seem to die, you can trust in a Savior who is alive, whose promises He keeps, and your hopes never die because of the empty tomb!

Hope is so much more than wishful thinking or personal optimism. Hope is not in ourselves! Our hope is not in what we can do but in the living Lord! Our hope is not in our financial security. We know how fast... how quickly that can go away. Our hope is not in our physical ability. Our hope is not in our emotional stability. Our hope is not in our intellectual acuity. Our hope certainly is not in our political activity. If your hope is in politics, God help you! [laughter]

Our hope... our certain and sure hope is in Christ and Christ alone! The Scripture says. [1 Corinthians 15:14] "*If Christ is not risen then everything we preach, everything we say is in vain, and we are of all people most miserable.*" So our hope is in Him who guarantees our future because we have trusted in Him.

Now Jeremiah 29 and 11 was originally written to Hebrews who were exiled in the land of Babylon because of their own sin and unbelief, many of the Israelites were taken away into captivity under the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, and there they were slaves in Babylon. It was a terrible predicament and many of them... Can you imagine a more hopeless situation for so many? And they even heard the news from the prophets that they would be there ... not just a quick trip through Babylon, but for 70 long years! Many of these would die in Babylon. And no doubt they were wondering, has God forgotten us? Does God still love us? Does He care about my life?

And that's when God delivered through Jeremiah, the prophet, this wonderful promise that "I know the thoughts that I have for you... the plans that I have for you. Plans not to harm you, not evil plans but good plans for your welfare, to give you a future and a hope." Because of Easter God has a plan

for your life. God has a personal plan for you, a destiny for you. He says, *"I know the plans that I have for you."* Some translations give this I know the thoughts that I think towards you, about you, your family, your future." Incredible isn't it, that God of the universe is thinking about you; He remembers you. He knows your name. He knows your need. Jesus says, "Even when a sparrow falls from the sky, God knows." And certainly if God cares about the birds, He cares about believers. *"I know the plans I have for you."*

Now... now we forget things. In fact, we often forget the things that we should remember, right, and remember the things that we ought to forget. But we tend to forget things. We forget special occasions, we forget birthdays, we forget anniversaries, we forget car keys. How much time do we spend looking for misplaced car keys? We forget telephone numbers. I mean, I've got my... my wife in my list of telephone numbers. I don't remember anybody's number! I'm lost without that little phone. I'm not even sure... don't tell her but I'm not even sure I know my wife's telephone number. But it's in the phone. I can get her. If she would answer the phone, in fact. [laughter] Can I get a witness from the men on that? [Amen] Right! (And on Easter, too; he said that on Easter! Do you believe it?) You know as you get a little older you... you don't remember things quite as well. You know there's one advantage to getting a little older. You can... you can hide your own Easter eggs, and so... [laughter] But we forget things!

But God never forgets! God remembers you. He said, "I know the thoughts I have towards you. You are always on my mind." Now, Willie sang that. I don't know if it was true when Willie sang it, but it's true when God says it. "You are on My mind always." The hope of Easter is that God never fails and God never forgets. And if you find yourself like these Hebrews, in bondage or in brokenness, even facing suffering and death, you can know that God cares, that He loves you, that you are never alone. The risen Lord said, [Matthew 28:20] *"I am with you always... always to the end of the age."*

"I know the plans I have for you." God does have a unique and perfect plan for every life. And purpose is so necessary for life. Life without purpose is pointless, and can be even be painless. So many people are directionless. They just seem to be going nowhere or going in circles. But life is meaningless without a mission, without a calling in your life. And if you are a believer and follower of Jesus there is a purpose for you. God has a destiny for you to fulfill. And even though you may not see it just yet, even though you may not have experienced it just yet, trust in God, hope in God, wait on the Lord and He will see you through! The psalmist said, Psalm 147 and verse 11, *"The Lord delights in those who put their hope in His unfailing love."*

So there is hope this Easter in Christ because He has a plan for your life, and because God's plan for you is good! It is a good and perfect plan. God would choose for you what you would choose for yourself if you had all the facts. The Scripture here says, *"plans for your welfare and not for evil."*

I like the way The Message gives this, *"Plans to take care of you, not abandon you; plans for good and not for disaster."*

When Jesus died on the cross it was a disaster for the disciples. They ran away and hid, many of them denying Him. And all seemed lost. Jesus, their Master and Savior and Lord was in a tomb! After three days there were two despondent disciples walking along a road to Emmaus, a little village outside of Jerusalem, and they were brokenhearted. And Jesus joined them. Now they didn't recognize Him at the moment for whatever reason... through unbelief. Jesus said... Certainly their eyes were clouded with despair. But they didn't recognize that Jesus was walking with them. And so He went along. He said, "Why are you so sad?" They said, "Where have you been?" They said, "Have you not known? Don't you know what happened? That they have killed Jesus the Messiah!" "We had hoped (notice past tense. Hope was gone) We had hoped that He was the One, the One who would deliver us, the One who would save us." The closest followers of Jesus were nowhere to be found.

But then the news began to hit the street. The tomb was empty! The stone was rolled away! The women who went to the tomb early came back with a report, "He is not here, and an angel told us that He is risen." The disciples who ran to the tomb, Peter and John; they saw the empty tomb and the grave clothes neatly folded and the word began to get out! He's alive! The enemies of Christ began to hear it! The very ones who crucified Him, put Him on the cross heard the words, "The tomb is empty". They produce the body no matter how much they tried.

And because Jesus was alive, hope was reborn! Hope is alive again! And the future is with us. Defeat and death and sin and sorrow and hell itself is defeated! We have a future and a hope. This is good news! This is the anchor, the lifeline for our souls that steadies us in every storm, that secures us in every crisis! No, His thoughts for you are good, even when it doesn't look to be good. Bad Friday... we call it Good Friday now, because we not only look to the cross, we look through the cross to the empty tomb. And God took a very bad day and turned it into a very great and glorious day on Easter morning, and that is what God is always doing in our lives! He is working all things together for His glory and our good. Those who love the Lord, and those who are called... called to His purpose.

I had a young man tell me one time he'd been through a series of accidents... accidents and difficulties and crises in his life, and I said, "Well, tell me what you think about that." He said, "I think God's trying to kill me. He just keeps missing!" [laughter] No, God is not trying to kill you! He is conforming you as a believer to be more and more like Him. There's never... listen to me... there's never a good reason to give up!

Now Easter may be a very happy day for you. I mean, your life is all sunshine and flowers are blooming and the warmth of the sun from the cold winter is... is warming your life. Ranger baseball is on the way. Everything (chuckle) maybe that's good; maybe that's not good! But, you know, kids are

chasing Easter eggs. You're enjoying spending time with your family and friends. All good! It's a good day!

But for many Easter today is not a good day. It could be a sad day. Someone you love is gone. You feel depressed. You don't feel hopeful, you feel almost hopeless. And you need more than just somehow to cope with your crisis. You really need to hope in your crisis. You really need something more than... than pious words and platitudes. You need something that's sure and steady, something to anchor you! That is hope! When life is falling apart... falling apart, when you want to quit, when you feel hopeless, you wonder, "Does God care? Does God know? Is God thinking good thoughts to me? How about my future, is it a good future?"

Yes, it is! And the resurrection is the answer to all of your questions ultimately. You may not get all your questions answered this side of eternity, but in the resurrection, in the hope that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ we ultimately get the answer to everything we need in life! The answer is the resurrection!

Jeremiah 29:11 is a promise from God! To give you a future and a hope! There are thousands of promises in the Bible. Some say as many as 7000 promises in the Bible. God has promised because of the resurrection to keep every one of them! Jesus said,... He promised, "I will die on a cross, but on the third day I'm coming back! I'll be alive again!" He kept that promise! And if He kept that promise, don't you know that He will keep every promise that He's made for you. Amen? Every promise of God is true! [applause] And you can accept the guarantee to live in that hope and to live in every promise. Jesus came out of that tomb and it's empty!

Think with me now about another tomb, the tomb of Lazarus, one of Jesus' closest friends who lived in a place called Bethany, again, outside of Jerusalem. Lazarus, His buddy, died, and by the time Jesus arrived for the funeral to pay His respects, it seemed that hope was gone. Lazarus' sister, Martha, said, [John 11:21] "*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*" And when Jesus saw the seen He did something unexpected. He wept. Big tears puddled up in His eyes and began to flow down His face. He wept. We wonder why He wept, but it's clear He wept because death was never as God intended, never had He intended. Certainly He wept with those as He weeps with us and grieves with us and bears our grief and carries our sorrows! But when He looked at death and the consequences of sin and death, Jesus wept.

And then He said, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out of that grave. And that's when Jesus said in John 11:26 and 27: "*I am the resurrection and the life! The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in Me will never die.*" And then He asked a question that we all must answer. "Do you believe this?" Do you believe this? That Jesus is risen, He is the One who gives risen life to all who believe. Once the disciples believed this truth, their lives were transformed. They became bold and courageous witnesses for Christ. You can

read all about it in the book of Acts in the New Testament. It was a resurrection revolution that changed the world!

That's what the A.D. series is about. It's about the cross and the resurrection and the aftermath, and the Acts of the Apostles and the power of the Holy Spirit who turned the world upside down! The fact that the disciples were transformed is one of the most compelling reasons to believe in the resurrection. They were hiding, fearful for their lives, but something turned them around. Some say... some skeptic would say, "Well, they were hallucinating, or they made the whole thing up. They wanted to start a new religion and they wanted this to be true so much that they said it was true when it wasn't true." Yet all of the disciples, the witnesses of Jesus who saw the resurrection... not only just a few friends, but the Scripture tells us that upwards of 500 people saw Jesus alive after the resurrection, but these disciples in particular... all of them believed and ultimately died martyr's deaths, except for John who was exiled on the Isle of Patmos and died in faith.

Now the fact is that some people will die for a lie if they don't know it's a lie. Terrorists do that. But very few if any will die for a lie if they know it's a lie, it's a hoax! All of the disciples went to their deaths refusing to recant, refusing to rescind their statement that Jesus is alive! Not one of them could deny the fact that Jesus is Lord and Jesus is life! That's the hope of Easter! And because of Easter, therefore, your future is filled with hope. God is bringing you home. That was the promise to Israel. "It's going to be a while," He said, "but I'll bring you back! I'll bring you back home!" The Scripture does not hope does not disappoint. You can count on our Lord's promises.

This phrase "to give you a future and a hope" literally means to give you an expected end. I like that! To give you an expected end. Which means that in the end you can count on the fact that God is bringing you through. You can expect that God will not just give you the mechanism to cope with your crisis, but to hope with your crisis. Therefore, as Christians because of Easter... because Jesus is alive we don't expect a hopeless end, but we expect an endless hope! Not a hopeless end but an endless hope! The hope of Easter is all we need in both life and death. Everything else comparatively is trivial.

Jesus is alive! That means that we can live lives forgiven! That the resurrection means that our sins have been buried and carried away, and we are made alive in Christ! We've been given new lives! The resurrection means that we now have a purpose for our lives! We're not just meandering through life or trying pleasure, whatever to enjoy life! We now have a purpose that is sure and settled in our lives. We know our lives are going somewhere good because of the future and the hope! We have strength for living! The power of the resurrection! "Christ in you the hope of glory!" The living Christ; Christ lives in me! I have strength for every day.

As a pastor I often hear it in talking to people how tired people are. Everybody almost will say... How you doing? "Well, I'm tired." And people are tired! We're running here and there, all kinds of demands and structures and schedules! People are running around with their tongues hanging out, stressed out! People are tired! They wake up thinking about when they can go to bed! [laughter] That's no way to live. Jesus said, "I'll come to give you strength even when you don't feel like putting one foot in front of another. Just take that one step and I'll give you strength. And where that came from there's more power!" [Philippians 4:13] *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

And ultimately the greatest benefit and blessing... Of course, I could mention hundreds of blessings and benefits from this Easter hope, but not only the forgiveness of sin and a purpose in life, and... and strength for every day, but a bright hope for tomorrow! Your future is with Him. That's the hope of Easter. That death is not the end of the road; it's just a bend in the road because Christ lives! We're all going to die; that's a fact! Nothing can change that. Only one thing can change that is if Jesus comes in our generation.

Now I'm preaching the book of Revelation these days. I'd love to have you come back. It's not too late to get in on our study of the Revelation on weekend[s]. But we're talking about the future, the things that are happening now and things yet to come, the promise of the future that is ours in Christ to make all things new.

So Christ may come and take us home to be with Him. But if He doesn't, we're all going to die. But when we die as Christians we go straight to heaven. [Philippians 1:21] *"To live is Christ, and to die is gain."* Our future... our hope is with the One who said, [John 14:2-3] *"I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."*

In His death He saved us, in His life He has raised us! He has defeated sin, death, and the grave. No wonder the Bible calls this hope the *"blessed hope"*. We're not home yet, but we will be soon, because God said, "I'm going to give you a future and a hope. I'm going to take you back home." There is an expectant end. [Hebrews 9:27] *"It's appointed unto man once to die, and then the judgment."* But for the believer there is an expected end that we would be with Christ forever. So keep believing, keep hoping. Put your future in the nail-scarred hand of the risen Redeemer. The Scripture says in Romans 8:24, *"In this hope we were saved."*

Now in closing down this message, look just passed verse 11 in Jeremiah 29, if you still have your Bible's open. If not, just listen up. Verse 13 says this: *"You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart."* God says in verse 14: "I will be found by you." God is not hiding hope. It's available for you. He said, "If you seek Me... if you want Me, you can have Me! You can have this hope! If you search for Me, I guarantee you, you will find Me!"

Maybe you came today as a seeker. If you're not a believer, I hope you're a seeker... that you came sincerely seeking. I promise you if you sincerely seek Him you will find Him. God's not, you know, making salvation like one big cosmic Easter egg hunt.

We had our children... our grandchildren yesterday. We had a little Easter egg hunt, and Ian, one of our grandsons, the ten-year-old, he hid... hid the eggs, but he really didn't hide them that well. Because the little kids are two and three years old. So when you hide the eggs from the little kids, you don't hide them where they can't find them! [laughter] "Oh, yeah, let's hide them over here! They'll never find them now!" [laughter] No, you put them out where they can see them. They go running... their little legs go running. They're so happy to find those eggs. And sometimes, you know, I'm out there in the yard with them, and I say, "Hey, Dylan, look over there, look over there, look over there!" Brrr... he goes over there!"

I'm just sort of just like the Holy Spirit saying to you, you know, [laughter] "Look over there! God's right here! You don't have to run around the world! He's not hiding from you! [applause] If you seek Him, you will find Him!

We had a big Easter egg drop. I mean, only at Prestonwood, right? We bring helicopters in to drop thousands of eggs... little plastic eggs with little prizes inside, or whatever. And it's hilarious to watch these kids, you know, because we got them in the stands of the ball field and the helicopter comes over and then these eggs just go pouring out! Hundreds and hundreds of them! I saw that yesterday. I'm thinking, "You know..." and the kids go running out. They have no trouble finding those eggs.

I was thinking, you know, that's the way God is. He just pours out resurrection life! He just pours it on and on and on, and you go running, and you'll find what God has provided for you! That's hope! [applause] That's hope!

H-O-P-E - Here's how to have hope:

"H" - Humble yourself. You know why some people never have hope? Because they're hoping in themselves. They're trusting in themselves. Their ego and pride... intellectual pride or spiritual pride. They won't humble themselves before God. Look, the Bible says [James 4:6] "*God resists the proud but He gives grace to the humble.*" Jesus said, "If you want to come to Me, come like a little child, like a little child chasing Easter eggs. Come to Me like a child and be converted." There was a man, a sinful man who stood on a street corner and he prayed a humble prayer, [Luke 18:13] "Lord, be merciful to me, Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." If you want hope start with that. Humble yourself before God. Say, "Lord, I know I can't do this. I cannot save myself."

And then "O" - Open your heart to receive Him. Jesus stands at the door and knocks...the door of your heart, the door of your life. Your heart represents you, your life. He said, [Revelation 3:20] *"I stand at the door and knock. And if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in."* The fact is, God is already opening hearts, and you can just push the door wide open and say, "Lord, Jesus, come into my life." John 1:12 says that *"If you believe in the Lord Jesus and receive Him, to as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to be called the children of God."* There's that child word again. To come like a child. Become a child of God. Open your heart to the Lord. Open your heart to the One who opened the tomb for you.

And "P" - is to profess your faith in Jesus Christ. That means to say it, to confess it. Romans 10: 9 and 10: *"If we confess with our mouths the Lord Jesus Christ and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, we will be saved!"* To be saved is to have hope! And when you profess Christ... when you stand for Christ, it honors God. It settles it and strengthens it in your own life. There's something about standing and saying it and professing it that Jesus called all of us to do. He said, [Matthew 10:32] *"Profess Me before men and I will profess you before the Father in heaven."* That's why in just a moment I'm going to ask many of you to stand and profess your faith in Jesus Christ as your living Lord.

"E" - means to embrace the future that God has prepared for you. Jesus said, [John 10:10] *"I've come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly."* You can embrace life now. You can enjoy life. I'm not saying there won't be hard times. I've already said there will be hard times! But in the midst of it all, in good days and bad days, bright days and dark days, there is hope. And you can embrace life and expect the best because Jesus is alive! And more than anything, you can expect eternal life, and you can know that when your day comes that you will stand before Him, saved forever, and your hope will be sight when you see Jesus Christ face to face.