**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**FAITH IN THE DARKEST OF TIMES**

**Luke 23:50-24:12**

**INTRODUCTION**

What do you do when faith seems impossible? Many years ago I went to the hospital to visit a friend who had just been in a horrific car accident. The doctors didn’t think he would survive. His skull had been fractured in multiple places, his brain had suffered massive trauma, and he had been in a coma for days. But one day, we received the good news that he had woken up. He was even able to talk to people, so I headed to the hospital to pay him a visit.

When I arrived, a pastor was there sitting at my friend’s bedside, reading Scripture and praying for my friend. I don’t remember much of what this pastor said to him, but what I do remember is what my friend kept saying: “I don’t believe in him! I don’t trust him anymore!”

And you know what? I didn’t blame him. Here was a young man in the prime of life who had just been brought to the brink of death, and it wasn’t a guarantee that he would live. Even if he did live, his life would never be the same. In those dark moments, who could expect him to believe that God had a good plan for him in all this? Who could expect him to trust God?

In moments like that, faith seems impossible, and yet faith is the one thing that will sustain you. If you go through a dark time like that without faith, you may survive, but you’ll turn into a bitter and cynical person who will always find peace and happiness elusive. But if you have faith, if you learn to trust God even in the midst of the deepest suffering, you’ll become the kind of person who can *rejoice* no matter what comes your way.

That’s what we’re going to look at today. Jesus’ disciples are going through the darkest moments of their lives as they recover from the shock of watching Jesus being brutally executed on a cross. For the first time since Chapter 1, Jesus is out of the picture. He’s gone, and it appears that he’s gone for good. The disciples must walk by faith, not by sight, just like we do.

What will they do? Will they trust God during these times of trial, or will they doubt? And when they’re confronted with the empty tomb, will they believe that Jesus has in fact risen from the dead as he said he would, or will they go on believing that Jesus is gone for good?

As we ask these questions of the text, we need to ask ourselves the same questions as well. In our seasons of darkness, will we trust God, or will we doubt? Will we cling to God’s promises by faith, or will we fall into despair because we just don’t see how God is at work?

The title of this sermon is **Faith in the Darkest of Times**. My aim today is to show you that **The Strongest Faith Comes From The Weakest People.**

We will have three points today:

1. The Basis of Faith
2. The Challenges of Faith
3. The Growth of Faith

(1) **THE BASIS OF FAITH**

After all the horror of the cross, our text today begins on a hopeful note in verse 50. Luke tells us about a man named Joseph who was a member of the council. This was the council known as the Sanhedrin, the same council that convicted Jesus of blasphemy and pressured Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus. Apparently the council’s decision wasn’t unanimous, because Joseph “had not consented to their decision and action”. Why not? Because “he was looking for the kingdom of God”. He wasn’t just a religious person. He was a spiritually-minded person who was genuinely seeking the Lord.

The other gospel writers tell us that this led him to become one of Jesus’ disciples. He was a believer, but he kept this a secret because he was afraid of what his Jewish brothers would do to him. That didn’t stop him from voting against the injustices that were committed against Jesus, and that wouldn’t stop him from honouring Jesus in his death.

Verses 52-53 say that he retrieved Jesus’ body from Pilate and wrapped him in a linen shroud before he laid him in a tomb cut in stone, which was likely the one he had prepared for his own burial. He did this for two reasons. He wanted to honour Jesus by giving him a dignified burial, and he wanted to honour God’s law. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 says,

“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

That’s what Joseph is doing. He is burying Jesus both to honour him, and to honour God’s law. Joseph is a man who fears God and wants to follow God’s Word, which is why Luke also points out in verse 54 that “It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning.” Joseph did all his work before the Sabbath began because he was a law-abiding Jew.

The same was true of the women in verses 55-56. These women were from Galilee, the same region where Jesus grew up. They had followed Jesus for a long time. Some of them had even provided for Jesus and his disciples. Luke told us in Chapter 8 that Mary Magdalene and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, along with many other women, provided for Jesus out of their means. And now, in 24:10, Luke tells us that both Mary Magdalene and Joanna are here at the empty tomb.

These women had honoured Jesus in his life, and now they want to honour Jesus in his death, so they follow Joseph to the tomb to see where Jesus’ body was laid before they return home to prepare spices and ointments to anoint his body the following day. But like Joseph, as soon as the Sabbath began, “they rested according to the commandment.”

Luke is showing us that, even after all the evil that the Jews had done to Jesus, there’s still a faithful remnant of Jewish people who believed in Jesus. The Jews may have crucified Jesus, but not all of them were responsible for his death. Some continued, in their own simple ways, to honour him in his death.

He’s also showing us that *no one* anticipated the resurrection. Not Joseph. Not the women. Not the apostles. If they were, Joseph wouldn’t have sealed Jesus’ body in a tomb, the women wouldn’t have cared about hiding the stench of decay with perfumes, and the apostles wouldn’t have been hiding out in a room somewhere, terrified that the Romans were going to get them next. None of them were anticipating the resurrection, because all of them believed that Jesus was gone for good.

That leads us to Chapter 24. Luke tells us that as soon as the Sabbath was over, at early dawn, these women from Galilee went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared, “And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb”. What happened? Had the grave been robbed? Had an earthquake dislodged the stone? Whatever it was, the women clearly expected to see Jesus’ body inside, so they went into the tomb. But it wasn’t there.

Verse 4 says that “they were perplexed about this”. They didn’t understand why the body would have gone missing. They certainly didn’t think about the possibility that it was missing because Jesus had risen from the dead. But then two men appear (angels), dressed in “dazzling apparel”.Their appearance was so shocking that the women fell on their faces in fear.

But they don’t need to be afraid, because these other-worldly figures serve the same God that they do, and they come with a message of hope. “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen!” Jesus has risen! He’s not in the tomb anymore, because he’s not dead anymore. He’s alive!

The phrase “has risen” is better translated as “*he is raised*”. This is important, because it tells us that Jesus didn’t just rise by himself. He was raised *by God*. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was *God’s* work. It was God’s way of saying that Jesus belongs to him. God sent him to the cross, and now God takes him out of the tomb by raising him from the dead to declare to the world that Jesus is indeed who he said he was: the Son of God.

The resurrection is one of the pillars of the Christian faith. We would not have Christianity if we did not have the resurrection. No resurrection, no Christianity, and no forgiveness of sins. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:17,

“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

But the reality is that Jesus has been raised from the dead, which means that those who trust in him are *not* in their sins. The cross tells us that our sins have been paid for, and the empty tomb tells us that the payment has been accepted in full. The resurrection is God’s way of saying that Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf has been accepted, so that we never have to fear God’s judgment.

It’s also God’s way of saying that death is not the end. There is life beyond this life, not just spiritual life, but physical life. After his death, Jesus didn’t just return as a ghost or a spirit. He returned *as a man*. God raised his body from the dead, so that he now lives, body and soul, *forever*. And one day, when Jesus returns to the earth, God will raise everyone from the dead. For those who trust in Jesus, they will be raised to everlasting life to be with God forever. For those who never trusted in Jesus, they will be raised as well, not to everlasting life, but to everlasting destruction. Resurrection is coming for all, but it all started with the resurrection of Jesus.

That’s what the angels want the women to believe, but they don’t just expect them to take their word for it. They expect them to take Jesus at *his* word. This leads us to verse 6 and the heart of our first point: “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.”

So why should the women believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead? *Because Jesus said so*. “Remember”, the angels say, “how he *told* you that he would be delivered and die and rise.” This is the only basis for true, lasting faith. Christians believe that Jesus died for our sins and rose on the third day, not because we saw it happen, or because Jesus appeared to us. We believe *because we believe his word.*

That’s what faith looks like in the darkest of times as well. When we’re in the midst of the deepest of suffering, we show our faith by trusting in God’s word. When tragedy strikes, or you receive terrible news, and you’re told that God works all things for the good of those who love him, you don’t say, “I don’t believe that! I don’t trust God!” You say, “I believe. It’s hard, but I believe, and by God’s grace, I will fight to continue to believe.”

Faith is believing God’s word, not just parts of it, but all of it. Not just in the sunny times, but in the darkest of times.

(2) **THE CHALLENGES OF FAITH**

This seems impossible, but it’s not. Verse 8 seems to tell us that the women believed, because as the angel reminded them of Jesus’ words, they remembered what Jesus said about his resurrection and ran home to tell the rest of the disciples. The disciples’ response, however, wouldn’t be quite the same. They wouldn’t believe as the women believed. We’ll look at this in our second point: The Challenges of Faith.

As the women return to the rest of the disciples, verse 9 says that “they told *all* these things to the Eleven and to all the others”. They told them about the empty tomb. They told them about the angels. And they told them about the words that Jesus had spoken to them that they just remembered: that he would be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.”

These are words that the disciples heard from Jesus on two occasions. The first was in Chapter 9. Jesus was praying in private with his disciples when he asked them who they thought he was. Peter answered that he was the Messiah. Jesus then warned them not to tell this to anyone and then told them clearly that,

“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (Luke 9:22)

Later in Chapter 18, Jesus tells them all this yet again:

“For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” (Luke 18:32-33)

So when the women came and told them about the empty tomb, and the angels, and the remembered words that Jesus had spoken about his death and resurrection, the disciples should have jumped for joy! They should have said, “It’s happening! Everything that Jesus said would happen is coming to pass. He said he would rise, and now he has risen. *Jesus is alive!*”

But that’s not how they responded. Verse 11: “…but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” This phrase “idle tale” was used in medical settings to refer to the delirious talk of those who were very sick. “You don’t know what you’re talking about”, they were saying to the women. “Stop talking nonsense”.

It’s hard to imagine a more disillusioned group of people than these disciples. I would like to think that I would have believed if I were in their shoes. After all, the evidence seemed overwhelming. They knew that Jesus could do supernatural things. They believed that God had sent him. They remembered that Jesus said he would rise from the dead on the third day, and here on the third day a large group of women was saying that he had. Why wouldn’t they believe?

It’s because humans aren’t just rational beings. We’re emotional beings as well, and when we *feel* something deeply, *reason* goes out the window. They had just seen the best man they had ever known whipped bloody and executed on a cross as the people he came to save ridiculed him. That’s traumatic. That leaves scars. That makes you feel like you can never trust anyone or anything again. It didn’t matter what the women reported. It didn’t even matter what Jesus had told them. *They would not believe*.

Have you ever been in a place like that? Have you ever been so hurt that faith seemed impossible? You may have known all the right things. You may have had people speaking truth to you, like the women did for the disciples, but still, you felt that you just couldn’t trust God or believe his promises. Instead, all you could think about was how hurt you were, or how scared you were, or how hopeless life had become.

That’s a hard place to be in, and that’s where the disciples found themselves after Jesus’ crucifixion. They could not believe that he had been raised from the dead. They *would* not believe even though the truth of the resurrection was staring them right in the face.

(3) **THE GROWTH OF FAITH**

When we find ourselves in that place of hopelessness and doubt, how do we get out? How do we learn to trust God again and live by faith when faith seems impossible? The answers are found in the most unlikely of sources as we turn to our final point: The Growth of Faith.

As the women reported all that they had seen and heard to the eleven apostles and the rest of the disciples, verse 12 tells us that one man got up, not with despair in his face, but with faith. It may have only been a spark of faith, but it was faith nonetheless, a faith that helped him get up on to his feet and run out the door so that he could see the empty tomb for himself. And when he stopped and looked in, he saw the linen cloths, not wrapped around the body of his Lord, but lying there by themselves, and “he went home marveling at what had happened.”

Who was this man? Peter! Of all people, it was Peter who responded with faith instead of doubt. Peter, who had just denied knowing Jesus three times. Peter, who had just broken his promise to Jesus to go with him to prison and to death.

If anyone had reason to despair, it was Peter, not just because of what had happened to Jesus, but because of what had happened to *him*. He was supposed to be the leader of the apostles. He was supposed to be the one to strengthen his brothers. But in the moments when his leadership was most needed, he failed. The leader of the apostles fled with the rest and hid like a coward.

Peter, who was once a man of faith, had become a man of doubt. He knew Jesus’ promise that those who lose their lives for his sake will find it, and that Jesus will repay everything they lose in this lifetime many times over in the age to come. He even knew that Jesus promised to rise from the dead on the third day. He knew all that, and yet, when his faith was finally tested, it crumbled like a house of cards.

So how does a man of doubt become a man of faith? Two reasons. The first is that Jesus prayed for him. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 22:

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” (Luke 22:31-32).

Jesus prayed that his faith would not fail, and here, we see that prayer being answered. The reason why Peter rose up and ran to the tomb was that his faith *hadn’t* failed. It may have only been as small as a mustard seed, but that’s all it takes for God to do mighty things. Doubting Peter was believing once again, because his Lord and Saviour prayed for him.

Let us not underestimate the power of prayer. Prayer is the lifeblood of faith. Without prayer, faith will dwindle and disappear. But with prayer, it will persevere even in the darkest of times. Like a shield, it will guard your faith from the doubts of your sin and the deceit of the devil.

When you feel that your faith is waning, pray for faith. Go to a private place, fall on your knees, and pray for faith. But don’t stop there. Ask others to pray with you and for you. That’s what Jesus did in the Garden. As he felt his faith weakening under the shadow of the cross, he asked his friends to pray with him. We must do the same.

And when those around you find faith difficult, we must pray for them. Whether they’re your friends, or your family members, or the person sitting beside you in the pew, we must pray for them like Jesus prayed for Peter, crying out to God that their faith would not fail in their times of trial.

That’s the first reason why Peter responded to this news about the resurrection with faith. Jesus prayed for him. Here’s the second: Peter learned to trust Jesus more than he trusted himself. We’ve often heard that behind every doubt is a belief. We doubt one thing because we believe a second thing that conflicts with the first thing. We doubt God’s goodness because we believe that he’s cruel. Or we doubt God’s love because we believe that we’re unworthy. Doubts never exist in a vacuum. They always exist because of the presence of another, conflicting belief.

The same is true when it comes to God. We don’t believe God’s promises because we’re believing something else, and most of the time, that something else is *ourselves*. That was certainly the case with Peter. Before Jesus was arrested, he didn’t believe in Jesus so much as he believed in himself. “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death!” he boasted. And what was Jesus’ response? “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”

You can almost see Peter rolling his eyes and thinking to himself, “That will never happen. I would never deny Jesus.” But then, just a few hours later, after the guards had taken Jesus to the High Priest’s house, blindfolded and beaten, Peter would do just that. Luke tells us that, immediately after the third denial,

“…the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.” (22:60-62)

Peter may have let Jesus down that day, but he also learned an important lesson. Don’t trust yourself over Jesus, because Jesus is going to be right *every time*. It was this lesson, coupled with the power of Jesus’ prayer, that prepared him for the news about Jesus’ resurrection. As he heard the women tell their story, and as he remembered Jesus’ own words about his resurrection, he fought back the doubts and started to believe, because he had learned the hard way that Jesus is always right. His word is always fulfilled.

This is how we become the kinds of people who trust God even when faith seems impossible. It’s through the power of prayer, and the lessons that Jesus teaches us about his faithfulness. We may have to learn those lessons in the midst of our failures like Peter did, but that’s a small price to pay to stop trusting ourselves and to start trusting Jesus instead.

And when we begin to understand that faith comes through our failures, we’ll begin to see our failures in a whole different light. Yes, we will grieve over our failures. Yes, our failures will give us shame. But God will redeem our failures and use them to give birth to the kind of faith that will persevere even through the darkest of times.

How do we know this? We know this because that’s what Jesus accomplished on the cross. He took all our failures – our failures to trust God, our failures to believe his promises, and our failures to obey his commands – and placed them upon himself, so that we can know that God will never judge us for them. Instead, God will use them to shape us and mold us to become the kinds of people who have an unshakeable faith in him.

**CONCLUSION**

So let me end by asking the original question: will you trust God in the darkest of times? The answer is no, no you won’t. You will fail. You will fail like Peter failed as he watched Jesus being beaten before the Council. You will fail like the disciples when they responded to the testimony of the women with doubt rather than faith.

But because of what Jesus has done for you, all your failures will not only be forgiven, but redeemed as God uses them to make you the kind of person who has faith even in the darkest of times. The grace of God makes it possible for faith in God to come even from failing God.

The strongest faith comes from the weakest people, because only the weak have learned to trust God rather than themselves. It may take dark times to make you weak. It may take many of your failures. But those are the things that God uses to make us the kinds of people who trust him.

The death of Jesus means that you don’t have to fear God’s judgment for your failures, and the resurrection of Jesus means that you can believe that he is making you a new person, the kind of person who trusts in God with an unshakeable, unwavering faith. That’s the power of the gospel, and my prayer for all of you is that you would know this power and persevere even in the darkest of times.