

# Easter / Groaning & Hoping

Hope you guys had a great Easter morning, hope you enjoyed all your **Easter traditions or non-traditions**, whether it was just sleeping in and resting a little, eating a chocolate Easter bunny the size of your head, grabbing brunch on the way in, or just buttoning up your pastels. As long as it wasn't eating anything called a "peep" you're doing good. Our tradition is that we get together and talk a little about the resurrection of Jesus. And I want to get into all of that. But before we do, I'd like to talk to you about something else. I want to talk to you about a common human experience that I believe the *story* of Easter actually speaks directly into.

And the experience I want to talk to you about is that of **groaning**. Now when I say I want to talk to you about groaning, I don't mean the physical act of groaning—that would be a fairly odd and specific thing for us to talk about. When I say "groaning," I mean something more like **the mental and emotional state that we all experience that is expressed sometimes through groaning. What I'm referring to is the default human reaction any time what we expect to happen, doesn't happen. The reaction anytime what we wanted to happen, didn't happen.** That's what I mean when I say *groaning*.

The type of groaning I'm talking about is **the feeling in the pit of your stomach** when you thought you had done everything you needed to do to get that promotion at work, *and then you found out someone else got it instead*. The feeling you get when you thought that guy or girl was into you, *except that then you found out they weren't*. The feeling when you thought your spouse was going to remember your anniversary, and then they didn't (November 10, babe. I got you).

But groaning can also get **a lot more serious** than that. How about the groaning that occurs when you want to get pregnant, and another month goes by, and you *still aren't pregnant*? How about the groaning that occurs when a twenty five year old finds out they have a chronic, degenerative disease that will get worse the rest of their life? How about the groaning that occurs when your family who is supposed to be a source of joy and emotional stability for you, is instead a source of constant pain and harm? How about our *collective* groaning when 17 people are killed in a Florida school? How about the type of groaning when those types of things happen on a regular basis? How about those types of groaning? **I think all of us, whether it's big or small, or everything in between, have probably experienced some type of groaning. And if we haven't already, chances are we will at some point in our lives.**

And as I said, groaning is a fairly universal human experience. **The first time we encounter groaning in the bible is all the way back in the book of Exodus.** The nation of Israel, God's people, had been promised that God was going to make them into a great nation, that he was going to bless them so that they could be a blessing, that he would make them more numerous than the stars in the sky. And yet, where we find them in Exodus is in Egypt, under the cruel, tyrannical rule of Pharaoh, and he is working every single one of them—men, women, and children—as *slaves*. So they had been promised that they'd become a great nation, **and yet here they were, suffering and even dying out under the hand of a nation far more powerful than them.** To say the least, this wasn't exactly how they saw that promise from God playing out in their minds. Talk about realities not matching expectations. **This was almost the polar opposite of everything they expected to happen.** Do you think there was a little bit of groaning going on with the Israelites? Yep, you would be right.

We read, in **Exodus 2**:

*The Israelites **groaned** in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their **groaning** and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.*

– Exodus 2:23b-24

Now, in short, the way God remembers that covenant is that he sends a man named **Moses** (either Charlton Heston or Christian Bale, depending on your age) to go and lead God's people out of slavery. In the midst of their groaning, **Moses is God's means of rescue for the Israelites, out of their groaning and slavery in Egypt. God responded to their groaning with freedom.** Keep that in mind.

Now, **fast forward with me** to somewhere around 4 B.C. God's people are once again suffering under a cruel, tyrannical leader—but this time his name is Caesar. **God's people, the nation of Israel, are again—albeit in different ways—being exploited, oppressed, marginalized by the powers that be.** And because of that, *groaning* is a central part of the life of God's people.

But in the midst of this, another man has arrived on the scene **by the name of Jesus.** **And Jesus is claiming, over and over again in a dozen different ways to be the one who's gonna put things right again for God's people.** He's going to give a voice to their voicelessness, he's going to bring them deliverance from oppression, he's going to usher in a new way of doing things that will put the empire of Rome in its place. **He's going to be the end to their groaning.** In fact, come to think of it, his claims are sounding a lot like what God sent Moses to do for them back in the day. Jesus claims that he will be the new Moses. He is going to do what Moses did for their ancestors. He's going to make things right for Israel. And all these Israelites had grown up hearing the stories about Moses and the Exodus. So, can you imagine the expectation level for the nation of Israel? This is *it*. This is their moment. Finally.

The **expectations were so high that** a group of ragtag fishermen and tax collectors and zealots have given up everything to follow after this man named Jesus. They've left houses, families, jobs, livelihoods—all because they were crazy enough to believe that this guy named Jesus might just be who he said he was. Most of them had devoted three years of their life and sacrificed all sorts of things to follow Jesus around and learn to embody everything he said about how the world one day would be. **These disciples gambled their everything on the belief that Jesus was precisely the one who was going to change things for Israel.** The anticipation was palpable.

**And then, on a Friday afternoon, this Jesus was dead.** And not just kind of dead. Visibly dead. Publicly dead. Brutally dead. The kind of death you die when evil people want to make an example out of you. Many of these disciples watched with their very own eyes as he was beaten within an inch of his life, as his hands and feet were nailed to block of wood, as people mocked him, cursed him, spit on him. And then they watched as he stopped breathing. His body slouched down on the cross, and the cruel Roman soldiers stuck a spear into his side, just to make sure there wasn't any life left in him.

I want you to see **how Luke, an author of an early biography of Jesus, records** this moment in time:

*It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out*

*with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.*

In those verses, **can't you just feel the hope being sucked out** of the story? It says it was the middle of the day and *darkness* came over the land. And then, just to make sure you didn't miss it, he says more literally, "the sun *stopped shining*." What Luke is doing here is communicating and reiterating in multiple ways that **this was the moment when all the anticipations of Israel came to a bitter end. This is where Jesus died, and all of Israel's expectations died with him.**

Now, **can you imagine the letdown?** Can you imagine the crushing weight of defeat in these disciples as they watched their leader, the one who was going to change things for them and their people, die? Can you imagine what they felt as his body was wheeled off to be put in a **tomb**? A *tomb*. Where they put *dead* people. Where they had put every other person, every other self-proclaimed revolutionary and religious leader, every other person who claimed they were going to change things in the world. Jesus was going to be put in a tomb just like *them*. **Can you imagine the *groaning* the disciples experienced as all this happened? What a stark disconnect between their expectation and their reality. What a crushing difference between what they wanted to happen and what seemed to be happening.** By all appearances, it was all *over*. *Everything* was over.

I think we get a vivid depiction of this **Luke 24**. We are now **three days after Jesus died**, and it's a Sunday—what would become known as the very first Easter, but what at this point in the story is just the most depressing Sunday of the disciples' lives. The disciples (or most of them) are still reeling from all that just went down. The emotional hangover from such an event had to be something serious.

At some point earlier in the day, a few of the **female disciples** had gone to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, and been a little surprised to find his body missing. They come back to tell the rest of the (male) disciples this, and I want you to see what it says happens:

*When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. **But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.***

They don't believe them! Now, this really is only barely related to the rest of the teaching, but it bears saying: **men, listen to women! Hear them out!** There are a million reasons for you to do this right now in our culture, but if for no other reason—do it because if you don't, you might miss out on a resurrection. Again, somewhat unrelated, but important.

These three women go and tell the other disciples that Jesus' body is gone, and the disciples decide that this sounds like nonsense. Now, I'd like to remind you that these are the **same disciples who had heard** Jesus say, on at least one occasion, "I will be killed and on the *third day I will rise*." Those same guys, hear these female disciples say *Jesus' dead body is no longer in the place that dead bodies are supposed to be*. Don't you think, if you're the disciples and you're told this, you would at least go "hey, let's go check things out at the tomb—what could it hurt?" But they don't. ~~I'm sure they responded by trying to mansplain something to the women about how where the body probably was, how it probably wasn't what they thought.~~ **But these disciples, their expectations are so pulled out from under them,**

**they are so burnt out on their anticipations that they don't even want to process what could be good news.**

Now, I know I've poked fun at the disciples a little, but **the reality is a ton of us have been there. A ton of us have been so disappointed that we don't even want to hear anything good.** A ton of us have been so burned by unmet expectations, undesired anticipations, that we say things like "don't tell me anything unless it's certain." "Unless you're sure of it, I don't want to hear it." That's where the disciples are at emotionally and mentally: "don't even start with this resurrection stuff."

And then **the scene shifts** to two of these disciples, later that same day. Let's take a look:

*Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.*

Sometimes, when the king of the world dies, you just need to **go out for some air** to process it all. So they're walking along the road, talking about all that had just went down, and look at what happens next:

*As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.*

Now, I have **no idea how Jesus pulled this off** practically. My mind immediately goes to Jesus in one of those glasses with eyebrows and a fake nose, maybe some type of bald cap and fake hair, like they wear in SNL skits. Or maybe it's that Jesus normally had a great, thick beard, and then went with a more downtowner, 5 o'clock stubble look post-resurrection. Or maybe Jesus just supernaturally obscures his appearance to them in some way I don't understand. Who knows. But one way or another, **Jesus sneaks up behind them and starts walking with them, without them recognizing who he is.**

*He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"*

"This poor guy hasn't caught up on the news." The **irony of this statement** from the disciples is rich. They ask him if "he is the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know what has happened." **In reality, the guy they're talking to is the only one who knows fully what has happened.** The conversation continues:

*"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but..."*

[and please, please, **do not miss what they say here, because it sums up everything that they thought, and the nation of Israel thought...**]

*...we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.*

**They had hoped** that "he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." That's **Exodus language.** That's *groaning* language. They had hoped that Jesus was going to be who he said he was. **They had**

hoped that he was going to come and do for them what Moses did for Israel back in the day. They had hoped that he was going to set things right, to end their exploitation and oppression at the hand of the Roman empire. They had all these hopes for who Jesus was going to be. Do you hear the tension between what they wanted to happen, and what happened? Between their expectation and their reality? Do you hear their *groaning*? “We had hoped that all *this* was gonna happen, but instead they crucified him.”

And don't miss, they say that they “*had hoped,*” past tense, which implies what? *That they do not hope it anymore.* Because now he's dead. The charade is over, and they're all done with all that silly hoping. All that's left to do now is groan, but with no end in sight.

The two disciples go on to explain that some of the female disciples had “amazed them, telling them that the body wasn't at the tomb.” You'll notice that by saying the women “amazed them,” they leave out the part where they thought the women were crazy. But then Jesus has a very pointed response to what they say here:

*He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

Jesus, still in disguise, says to them “*yeah, but isn't this the way it was supposed to play out?*” Didn't this guy say that he would suffer, be rejected, scorned, mocked—isn't that how the Scriptures said it would all go down?” And then he talks to them about all of the Scriptures, everything in the Old Testament, that alluded to that reality.

So just a few verses later, the disciples get to where they were going, and the disciples ask Jesus, who they still don't recognize, to hang out a little longer, so he does. And they sit down to eat, Jesus hands them each bread, and all of a sudden, it clicks for them. (Not least because Jesus spent a *lot* of his time eating with disciples during his life.) This was Jesus in his natural habitat, breaking bread with his disciples. And it's in this moment that the two disciples go “wait a second.” This is Jesus. This is our dude.

And as soon as they recognize him, he's gone. **Apparently, that was why Jesus was there, simply to show them, in person, that he was alive. That the story was not over. Their expectations and anticipations of who he was and what he had come to accomplish were not only not over—they were more alive and more real now than ever before.** Jesus had accomplished the impossible task he said he would accomplish. He had risen from the dead. **Their groaning was not pointless—it had an answer. And that answer was in the resurrection of Jesus.**

So look at what they do next:

*They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.”*

...to which, I can only imagine, the **women** respond with, “**really**?!” So you’re gonna announce it just like it’s a brand new idea? We literally just said that.”

Now, at this moment, what starts to happen all of the letdown of the previous three days is reversed. Their expectation and anticipation of everything they thought Jesus was going to do is brought right back into the picture, except now it’s dialed up to an 11. **Now it’s not just an idea—it’s a certainty**. Everyone now starts to become *certain* that Jesus is who he said he was and that he is doing, in a whole new and unexpected way, what he said he was going to do. **There is still groaning, but now it’s reunited with groaning’s only friend in this world—and that’s hope**. Their groans are now met with hope.

Now, **when I say hope**, I need to explain what I mean. Because **what we usually mean when we talk about “hope,” and what the bible means “hope,” are not really the same thing**. When we talk about, it’s usually based in uncertainty. We say things like “I hope I get this job,” or, prior to a couple weeks ago, “I hope the Vols make it to the final four.” **What we’re saying is that we want something to happen, but we’re very unsure as to whether it will or not**. In fact, if you come up to me and say “it’s supposed to be warm this week!” and I respond by going “I hope so,” what am I really saying? I’m saying that I’m *less confident* it’s gonna happen than you are.

But it’s important to know that **that’s not really how the bible uses** the word “hope.” When the bible talks about hope, it’s not based in *uncertainty*, but rather in *certainty*. Romans 5 famously says that “hope does not put us to shame.” Meaning, **hope doesn’t let us down**. Hope is not blind optimism. Hope, according to the bible, is not uncertain. Not at all. The bible uses the word hope more like we use the words expectation or anticipation. **When the bible tells us we can have hope about something, it’s saying we can be certain about it**.

So **certain about what, exactly?** Well according to the bible, **that there will be a definitive end to all of our groaning**. That one day, not only us, but the entire creation will undergo a transformation that will put all of our groaning to rest. Take a look at how **Romans 8** puts it:

*For the creation was subjected to futility [which is where our groaning comes from], not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in **hope** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

**The hope that we have is that our groaning will not last forever. That it’s headed somewhere, that there is a concrete end in sight**. And then look at what Paul **compares all of that to**, in v. 22:

*For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of **childbirth** until now.*

Okay, so here’s an **interesting metaphor**. So according to Paul, all of our groaning and our hoping is a little bit like childbirth. And as random as that might sound, I think it’s actually a beautiful metaphor. **So as we close, let’s just talk a little bit about childbirth**. If someone asks you what the Easter sermon was about this morning, just tell them we talked about childbirth. The utter horror on their face will be so worth it.



So, **when Ana and I were pregnant** with Whit (and when I say “we,” I mainly mean “her”), life got a lot more complicated. And at times frustrating. For both of us. A lot *more* complicated and frustrating to *her* than to *me*, but somewhat for both of us. So, for the first couple months there was a lot of throwing up, some throwing up in random places, and a lot of sickness. We weren’t able to go places as much because she just didn’t feel good enough to a lot of months. She would get tired way more often, she would want to eat way weirder things and the most random times, her body wouldn’t cooperate with her much of the time. Life was just a lot more complicated and frustrating during pregnancy. And if I thought that part of pregnancy was difficult, imagine my shock when we got checked into that hospital room and stuff started getting real. I remember sitting with her through the night and gently applying pressure to her back every time contractions would come. I remember watching her face as she experienced what had to be the most severe pain she’d ever experienced in her life. And something you should know about Ana, when she’s in pain, she doesn’t cry. She just intensifies. Like her “I’m in pain face” looks more like a “I’m gonna kill someone with my bare hands” determined face. So all of this is happening, and I just remember thinking “this is horrible.” This is a horrible experience. And in many ways it was.

But here’s the thing too—**there was an end to it.** And not just any end to it, but a beautiful end to it. I **knew, the whole time that she was experiencing all of this, that there was something beautiful at the end of it all.** And that something was a human being. A beautiful baby boy that we would get to love and hold and experience. And I knew that for sure. Like for certain. Like, there was zero part of me that during all of this pain and agony going “I mean maybe there’s a baby causing all this? Or maybe this whole thing is just one bad nine month long stomachache—who knows!? But it sure is exciting!” No, not at all. I knew, **there was a concrete expectation in both of us that all of this pain and agony and frustration and inconvenience, would ultimately give way to one of the most beautiful things we’d ever be a part of.**

And **Paul says**—and listen because this is so important—that **our groaning and our hoping...is kind of like that.** On the one hand, by comparing our current frustrations and disappointments and pain and hurt to childbirth, **I think it’s obvious that Paul is not trying at all to downplay the reality of groaning and suffering and the awfulness in the world.** Not at all. He uses one of the most physically painful experiences that people go through. But on the other hand, by choosing this metaphor, **Paul is also trying to communicate something very vivid and very powerful about the nature of hope: that it can be trusted.** That it can be counted on. That hope, in his own language from a few chapters earlier, “does not put us to shame.” There is an end in sight to our groaning—and that’s not wishful thinking, that’s not empty optimism—that’s *verifiable truth* because of the resurrection of Jesus. We can bank on it. Bet our lives on it.

So **this week, this month, this year,** when you are faced with circumstance after circumstance after circumstance to groan at the brokenness of our world, and the reality that your life is not what you had expected it to be. **You can rest assured, through the resurrection of Jesus, that it *will not always be that way.* That even in our groaning we can have hope. That though this life is painful, and difficult, and at times completely devastating, it will not always be like that. We do not know exactly *when* things will change, but we have complete confidence that they will. And that’s what the resurrection is all about.**

Will you pray with me?