



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)

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He has taken my hopelessness away

Easter message 2010

John 20:1-18

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

Is there anyone on earth who hasn't experienced a loss of hope? This experience is so common to humanity that I'm sure we all know the signs: tears, lack of energy, confused thinking, fear, withdrawal. So we can easily imagine how Mary Magdalene was feeling that day as she went to Jesus' tomb. She had seen her Lord and Savior, Jesus, crucified on the cross just days before. She went to the garden, prepared to anoint the lifeless body of her beloved Master with spices. But when she arrived, she didn't even have the comfort of performing this traditional ritual. Jesus' body was gone.

"They have taken my Lord away," she cried. Her Lord – who represented her hope for this life and the next – was gone. She ran to tell the disciples, who ran to the tomb and confirmed the awful truth – Jesus' body was gone. They believed Mary's words when they saw his grave clothes lying where his body should have been. And then, the text says, they went home, hopeless.

But Mary stayed – perhaps to lament, perhaps to solve the mystery. There's no way to know what went on inside her broken heart and tormented mind. Standing outside the empty tomb crying, she looked inside again, as though to convince herself of the sad reality. This time, there were two angels inside. "Why are you crying?" they asked her. Again, a man she did not recognize asks her, "Why are you crying?"

She answers with the same words she said to the disciples: "They have taken my Lord away." And her tears, her demeanor and her body confirm, "They have taken my *hope* away."

Jerusalem, as the site of the resurrection, should be the city of hope. But many people here, Israeli and Palestinian alike, find it easy to relate to Mary's sadness. We feel there is no hope. We cry. We lack energy. We don't think clearly. We are afraid. We withdraw into our territories, our political positions, our arguments and opinions, and lock the door. Extremists try to justify their erroneous positions with holy writings, which threatens to turn the political situation into a religious war. The demolished houses, the ruins of the peace process, the bloodshed, the mistrust, the violence, the fear, the hate, the military action make us see our circumstances as a frightening, dark tomb. We are like Mary, standing at the empty tomb saying, "They have taken my Lord away. They have taken our hope away. And we do not know where they put it."

Where do we find hope when all seems hopeless? Martin Luther finds it in the very act that brings us into the Christian family: “Through baptism, we are restored to a life of hope, or rather to a hope of life.” Baptized into life in Christ, our hope comes from our resurrected Lord, who sustains and renews our hope, enabling us to endure difficulties, vulnerability and weakness. And he not only implants this hope in us but commissions us to carry it to all. This is why we in Jerusalem continue to shout out the message of the early church: the resurrection of Christ is our sole hope in this world. This has been our message for 2,000 years, and will continue to be our message until Christ returns. For the living Christ will never allow our hope to fade away, for he is a God of hope and wants us to be messengers of hope.

I experienced this deeply this past January at the general assembly of the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC) in Beirut, Lebanon. I had gone seeking a word of hope – and I received it, as I listened to the testimonies of our sisters and brothers in Christ in Sudan, in Iran, Iraq and other countries in the Middle East. To me, it seemed as though the risen Lord was commissioning us for a new mission; that, like Mary, we are to revive hope in our fellow disciples by reminding them that “the Lord is risen”; that, like St. Paul admonishes, we are to strengthen our sisters and brothers in need.

Likewise, my sisters and brothers of FMEEC wanted a word of hope from Jerusalem. I told them how the evangelical message of grace was having an impact in the Middle East. I told them about how we were dialoguing with interfaith partners to bring justice to our region. I told them how the risen Lord gives me hope even in a hopeless situation.

Their asking me for hope made a deep impression on me. Isn't this exactly what our Lord intended – that our communion is deep and mutual? In God's family, there is no majority or minority, rich or poor, big or small. We're not divided into “the hopeful” and “the hopeless” – we all may experience both simultaneously. As one who experienced hopelessness, Jesus' resurrection gives hope that is not cheap but expensive, not lip service but genuine. The Lord commissions us all – not to bemoan our relative disadvantages but in all things to spread hope with our words, prayers, solidarity and help.

When Mary's hope was restored by meeting the risen Lord, did she become silent or hide herself away? Quite the opposite! In her hope, she found a new mission –the mission to proclaim this hope to the disciples and, perhaps, many more people. We can relate to this, can't we? For those who have experienced hope after hopelessness cannot keep the hope under a bushel basket, but must go and proclaim to the world that “Christ is risen!” This is the foundation of our hope. This we share with everyone who wants to hear. So, the resurrection commissions us to be proclaimers of hope.

Likewise, we in the ELCHJL feel we have an important mission in our society. Like Mary, we stay in this land dying for peace and justice. As Jesus called Mary as his apostle of the resurrection, so we Palestinian Christians are called as apostles of hope despite our struggle, despite our hopelessness. Our congregations, schools and centers play an important role in providing hope and developing Palestinian society. Our parishioners' daily struggle to maintain a Palestinian Christian witness in this land is an encouragement to our many partners and friends all over the world. Our efforts at building bridges between Palestinians and Israelis prepares us to live together peacefully after a political settlement is reached. Our dialogue with Muslims and Jews inspires other Christians to cross borders to build peace in this broken world. As St. Paul says of Jesus, “In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14b).

The resurrection calls us Palestinian Christians, given our current circumstances and our steadfast hope in the victory of life, a special call to impart hope where hopelessness exists in the world. We can

encourage persecuted Christians in Asia and Africa; advocate for innocent civilians in war-torn countries like Afghanistan and Iraq; stand up for oppressed minorities like Dalits in India; share our resources with countries like Haiti destroyed by earth quakes. We can facilitate reconciliation between majority and minority populations of Bangladesh, Central America, Burma and Turkey. We can teach people who fear unfamiliar cultures, religions and political realities about celebrating diversity. We can welcome refugees, migrants and trafficked people from among the poor and disempowered around the world. We can share with others the hope that comes from dialogue.

Surely everyone in this justice-deficient land, Israeli and Palestinian alike, longs for the day when they will hear words of peace like those found in John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

As long as I believe in the risen Christ, despair will never overcome my hope; hopelessness will never overcome my trust in the living Lord. He is commissioning us, like Mary, to go and tell the world that he is risen. And, like Mary, I must not look for hope in a tomb. For Jesus is not there – he is out in the midst of life, beckoning us to follow him in his mission for peace in our beloved country. No, our Lord is not in the tomb, but he is with all of us who long for and work for justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

May this hope, which began in Jerusalem with the risen Lord and continues in us today, inspire you to boldly say with us and all believers:

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Al Masih Qam! Haqan Qam!

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