March 26/27, 2016

Happily Ever After

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

(Opening scene: Mom reading story to her son)

"Once upon a time, in Iran, in a land not too far from here, lived a stunning princess. Her long hair was auburn and hung in ringlets to her waist. The beauty of her radiant green eyes and fair skin matched her name, Princess Ophelia. She was the only daughter of the beloved but very feeble King Stephen. All of his life he had ruled with kindness and justice. Princess Ophelia's heart was like that of her father in that she cared deeply for the welfare of those in their charge. No one in their kingdom lived without food, shelter, or protection.

Then one day the wicked King Henri stormed their castle with his men and took Princess Ophelia captive. Ophelia spent two years as a captive in King Henri's castle, and although she was fed and clothed, she was never allowed to leave the room where she was kept. Were it not for the window that looked out over Henri's kingdom, she may have gone mad, but the hope of a return to her father's peaceful kingdom beyond those walls kept her from falling into despair.

King Stephen had promised a substantial reward and his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who could successfully rescue her from the castle of King Henri. The castle was guarded by many soldiers and ogres at every entrance, but that was not what worried King Stephen. A blood-red, horn-tailed dragon with eyes as black as the night lived in the neighboring mountains and was always aware when someone approached the castle. There were many princes in King Stephen's kingdom who were willing to take on the armed soldiers and the ogres of Henri's castle, but their spirits became weak and their knees gave way when they were confronted with the thought of standing up to the dragon.

King Stephen was about to give up the thought of ever seeing his precious daughter again and then help arrived just as his hope was dying away. Prince Joseph rode into the kingdom with his loyal army and pledged that he would return with Princess Ophelia before nightfall the very next day. The battle that ensued was violent and disheartening, but Prince Joseph and his army got past the many guards of King Henri's castle. They dared to hope that they might reach Ophelia without the dragon's notice, but of course, that is never how the story goes.

The battle between Joseph's army and the dragon raged long into the night. One by one the brave soldiers fell until Joseph and the dragon were the only ones left. Now, the details of Joseph's victory over the dragon are a bit too graphic to tell in *this* story, but in the end Joseph did slay the mighty dragon. He rescued Princess Ophelia and returned her to her kingdom and her grateful father, and of course, Prince Joseph and Princess Ophelia fell madly in love, and without further delay they lived happily ever after."

Son: "Is that a true story?"

Mom: "Is that a true story? No, nobody ever lives happily ever after."

Bryan:
Wouldn't it be true that deep down in our souls we feel very dissatisfied with the world and the way that it is? Maybe even more than dissatisfied, we feel deeply disappointed. There's something deep within us that causes us to feel that this is not the way it's supposed to be. There's so much hatred. There's so much pain. There's so much suffering. There's so much death. There's so much disease, so much bloodshed. There's just so much disappointment in the world today, and we feel it deeply. Something deep within us causes us to long for something different and something more.

I think from time to time in life we get glimpses, moments. I sometimes refer to them as teaser moments. There may be moments with your children, moments with your spouse, moments with a close friend, maybe even moments alone, but they're just moments that are so deep and they're so rich and they're so deeply soul-satisfying, but they're just moments. They seem like glimpses of the way it was supposed to be. Even if tomorrow you had the greatest moment of your life, it would be tainted by the realization, "This will only be a moment, and I know it won't last." And there's something deep within us that longs for something more.

So where does that come from? Where does that longing deep within us come from that longs for something different, for something more? Is it possible that we were actually made for something different and something more, and is it possible that we could actually live *happily ever after?*

If you go back to the very first page of the Bible, we are reminded that before there was anything, there was God. "**In the beginning God**…" And while God was alone, God was not lonely because God lived in relationship with Himself—God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit—this wondrous and mysterious doctrine we know as the Trinity. God the Father celebrates the Son. God the Son celebrates the Spirit. The Spirit celebrates the Father, and for all eternity God loved and delighted and celebrated the relationships within the Trinity of God. For hundreds of years, theologians have referred to that as the dance of God—the Father celebrating the Son, the Son the Spirit, the Spirit the Father. I would also say that is the biblical understanding of eternal life. It isn't just a duration of life, but it's actually the quality of life that has defined God forever.

Then God created. God created all that is, but when He created people, He created them uniquely, uniquely in His image. There are many aspects to the image of God, but perhaps most significant would be that we were made to experience relationship as God experiences relationship, uniquely so. Not only to experience relationship with one another, but perhaps most significantly and most soul-satisfyingly, a relationship with God. In other words, God made us to join in the dance. God placed Adam and Eve in a garden that He Himself referred to as Paradise, a place where there was meaning and there was purpose and there was work and there was pleasure, a place where this beautiful relationship between God and people in His image would exist and people would live happily ever after.

The big risk, the big temptation for people made in the image of God, is we have a tendency to believe we can *be* God, that we can decide what's right and wrong; we can decide what's good and evil. I can be in charge of my own significance, of my own value, of my own protection, of my own pleasure. I'm going to live life on my terms; I'm going to run my own show. The idea of practically functioning as your own god isn't restricted to just the atheists. Most religious people practically function as their own god. They are in charge of their own lives in a very real and practical way. Most people that claim some level of spirituality, at the end of the day, practically speaking, function as their own gods, and the reason we do that is because we're convinced that life will be better that way. I'll be happier; I'll be more satisfied; I'll be more fulfilled if I'm in charge.

That was the lie that Adam and Eve believed, and they rebelled against God. They sinned against God, and they plunged the human race into sin and chaos. The world such as it is today is a result of the rebellion and the chaos created because of sin in the world. It's interesting. People today want to blame God for the condition of the world, but this wasn't God's idea. This wasn't God's dream. This is a result of our rebellion and our sin and the chaos that it causes. As a matter of fact, when people on a daily basis continue to function as their own gods, they only continue to contribute to the chaos that defines the world today. This is *our* mess.

But even before you turn the page in the Bible on Adam and Eve's rebellion, God makes a promise, and the promise is that somehow through the seed of a woman, a human being, God would crush the head of the serpent, and God would somehow make a way back to Paradise. God would somehow bring life back out of death. There seems to be the hint in Genesis 3 that it will include the shedding of blood. Before we are halfway through the book of Genesis, we learn that the one who would become the seed of the woman would actually be God Himself, that somehow, someway God would become human flesh in order to shed His blood because of our inability to keep the covenant, our inability to live righteously before Him.

The rest of the Old Testament then is filled with pictures, metaphors, images, signposts, shadows that all point to the reminder that one day God would fulfill His promise and send a Savior. The holy days, the festivals, Passover, Sabbath, the Law, the temple, the sacrifices, the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, the furniture in the temple, all of those had meaning and purpose. They were shadows and metaphors and pictures and signposts that pointed to the future fulfillment of the promise that God would send a Savior.

God so wanted to make sure people didn't miss it that He raised up prophets that would predict what would happen in the future in order that when the Christ would come, He would perfectly fulfill those prophecies, identifying Himself as the long-awaited Savior—over three hundred predictive prophecies just about the Messiah Himself, all perfectly fulfilled in the Christ. Some of these prophecies were radical in order to make sure people didn't miss the coming of the Christ: things like a young Jewish girl would wake up one morning and be pregnant, having never had relations with a man—a miracle! There would be a star that would mark the birthplace so the Magi could find Him. The birth would be in Bethlehem and angels would announce the arrival of the Messiah to shepherds on a hillside, all fulfilling the prophecies that were made. Even predicting that a crazy king by the name of Herod would be so threatened by the birth of a potentially rival king that he would kill all the infant boys in the region—all predicted by the prophets. God so wanted to make sure that people didn't miss the coming of the Savior, He raised up a first century prophet, kind of a strange and wild sort of guy, whose job was to announce that the Messiah had come; the Messiah is here. As a matter of fact, there would be this moment in history when John the Baptist would point to Jesus and say, **"Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world!"** The Savior had come!

Jesus' ministry was filled with teaching, but it was also filled with miracles, not some backroom parlor tricks but legitimate miracles in front of hundreds and thousands of people to authenticate His claim that He was the long-awaited Savior. He turned water into wine. He fed five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes. He stepped up in a boat in the midst of a raging sea, and He commanded the wind and the waves to be quiet, a moment so spectacular that His own followers asked themselves, **"Who is this man that even the wind and the waves obey Him?"** He made the lame to walk; He made the blind to see; He even raised the dead to life in front of hundreds and thousands of people.

But it was so much more than this. In a first century Roman Jewish culture, there were those who were the untouchables, for example, the lepers who were removed from society to live in colonies by themselves. Many of these lepers would not have experienced a human touch in years, and yet Jesus went to them and He touched them. He literally touched the untouchables. First century Roman culture was filled with sinners and misfits and losers, prostitutes and tax collectors and thieves, and Jesus loved these people. Jesus loved them; He spent time with them; He taught them; He ate with them, and for most it was probably the first time in their lives there was even the glimmer of hope that there was some possibility that sinners and misfits and losers could actually have some sort of a relationship with a holy God. There was something deep within their souls that began to come alive as Jesus promised to be the bread of life to a hungry heart and the living water to thirsty souls. Maybe for the first time in their lives, they dared to hope and believe that it was possible.

These sinners and misfits and losers couldn't get enough of this Jesus, and it threatened the religious leaders of the day. They realized they were losing power; they were losing position; they were losing control with this message of the grace of God, and together with the Romans they conspired, "This Teacher must die!" Jesus called the religious leaders out. He called them self-righteous hypocrites. He rebuked them for putting so much manmade tradition and so much religion in a way that the people couldn't possibly get to God because of all this religious stuff, and for that He rebuked them. These religious leaders understood that Jesus was winning the hearts of the people, and they determined Jesus must die. One can't miss the irony that when the God of the universe took on human flesh and walked on this earth, it was not the secular Romans that opposed Him but rather the Jewish religious leaders of the day who feared they were losing power and position, and determined that Jesus must die.

Jesus was taken through a series of illegal trials. He was convicted on trumped-up charges, and He was condemned to die on a Roman cross. He was nailed to the cross on false charges, but the reason for which He would die was very real. This was *not* a plan gone badly. This was the plan from the beginning. This was the fulfillment of the promise made in Genesis 3:15 that somehow God would become the seed of a woman and as a man would shed His blood to pay for the sins of the world.

Sometimes people ask the question, "Why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive?" I never quite understand what that question is asking, but I think what the question is asking is, "Why couldn't God just pretend we didn't sin?" and the answer is because pretending we didn't sin has no real understanding in reality. Think of it this way. This past week we were saddened at the news out of Belgium of the tragedy in Brussels. Many, many people will talk long into the night trying to figure out, "What do we do now? What is the way forward? What is the way ahead? What is the right thing to do?" And there will be lots of opinions at the table, but the one option that will not be at the table is they cannot pretend it didn't happen. It *did* happen. There are people who are dead. There are families who are grieving. There are people who are maimed and injured. There is a community that will never be the same. The one option that is not on the table is we cannot pretend it didn't happen.

In the same way, we *have* sinned. We have made a mess of God's world. The one option that isn't on the table is God can't pretend it didn't happen. He is a God of justice. Payment must be made. God could condemn us for our sin and that would be justice, but God has offered an alternative plan. The alternative plan is that because Jesus was sinless, He could absorb upon Himself the sins of the world. He could take upon Himself the wrath of God. He would shed His blood for our sin, paying our debt, making atonement for our sin. The prophets predicted that the Messiah would be

executed. Jesus Himself said, **"I have come to give my life as a ransom for all."** This was the plan. It was the fulfillment of a promise made thousands of years before, so on that cross Jesus died.

He was buried in a rich man's tomb, not an obscure tomb that nobody knew about, but the tomb of a rich man, and everybody knew which tomb it was. One would have to imagine that when Jesus was buried in the tomb, that the hopes and dreams of His followers were buried with Him. They could not have possibly understood what was going on. For the first time in their lives, they had a sense of hope. They had a sense of future. Their souls had begun to come alive with this thought that they could possibly have a relationship with a holy, living God, but now all of that was buried with Jesus. Jesus had told them straight up that He would be crucified. He also told them straight up He would rise from the dead. Whatever they understood that to mean, they absolutely did not expect what happened that first Easter Sunday. I want to read it to you as recorded in Luke:

> **But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing; and as *the women* were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, *the men* said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." And they remembered His words, and returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the *mother* of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at what had happened.** (*NASB, Luke 24:1-12)

No question about it. The tomb was empty. Jesus had risen.

Now I understand, two thousand years later, there are critics and skeptics that laugh at the idea of a resurrected, risen Christ. We're twenty-first century people. We're sophisticated. We're scientific. That doesn't happen. With no evidence other than simply the belief that, knowing science, normal people don't rise from the dead, they have dismissed it. I *get* science. I couldn't agree more, but that is the point—that Jesus would do what no ordinary man would do. Defying science, defying reason, He would rise from the dead—a miracle which would validate His claim to be the Christ, the long-awaited Savior of the world. I understand science, and as far as I understand, young Jewish girls don't wake up one morning pregnant without ever knowing a man sexually. It was a miracle! As far as I know, ordinary men don't walk on the water. As far as I know, ordinary men or women cannot command the wind and the sea to be quiet.

Jesus' ministry was marked with miracles in front of thousands of people to validate and authenticate His claim to be the Messiah, and the greatest of all miracles is that He rose from the dead. I understand people today laugh and they scoff at that claim, but I tell you this, no one was laughing in first-century Jerusalem that day. That miracle absolutely rocked that city. Jerusalem was filled with critics and people that desperately wanted to stop the movement of Christianity, but there was not one thing they could do to dispute the claim of a resurrected Christ. Jesus did not rise from the dead in the darkness and slip out into the desert. It was a literal, physical, bodily resurrection.

He appeared to His friends. He appeared to His followers. He talked with them. He ate with them. He spent time with them. He appeared to over five hundred at one time. For forty days He was with them before He ascended to the Father.

There were plenty of skeptics and opponents of Jesus who, based on the evidence for resurrection, chose to place their faith in the message of a resurrected Christ—Roman soldiers, religious leaders, persecutors of Christianity that, based on the evidence, would believe in the resurrected Christ. In Jerusalem alone, in just a couple of months there were over ten thousand people that believed, knowing that they were putting their lives in jeopardy by declaring themselves to be followers of the risen Christ. Yet the evidence was so compelling, they were willing to die for that claim.

The message of the resurrected Christ spread like wildfire from Jerusalem to Samaria, around the Mediterranean and around the world. Two thousand years later the message of a crucified and risen Christ has spread to every continent, every culture of the world, and around the world there are millions and millions and millions of people that would claim that their lives have been radically changed by the power of the resurrected Christ. As a matter of fact, this weekend alone thousands of people will walk through these doors and bear testimony that their lives have been radically changed by the power of the resurrected Christ.

Because God offered His Son to make payment for sin, the work was finished on the cross. Jesus Himself said it. **"It is finished!"** Paid in full for those who by faith are willing to believe, "...that Jesus died for my sins and I trust Jesus to be my Savior." God offers salvation freely as a gift. You don't have to go out and get religious. You don't have to go out and clean up your act and get good. God offers you His salvation freely as a gift of His grace, if by faith you chose to receive it. God offers you the forgiveness of your sins. Based on that forgiveness, He invites you into the dance to enter into a soul-satisfying relationship with God. God promises you peace. He promises you security. He promises you joy, and He promises you a future. He promises that even though you die, you will live. The literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus is our guarantee when God promises that in Christ we will experience a literal, physical, bodily resurrection from the dead. God promises to usher in a New Heaven and a New Earth, to redeem and restore the earth back to the way it was meant to be, to give us the life that our souls long for and, yes, it is true: In Christ He has promised that one day we will live *happily ever after*. It seems to me on this Easter Sunday that is something to celebrate!

Our Father, this morning we celebrate the crucified and risen Christ. God, many in this room this morning would bear testimony that this living, resurrected Christ has changed their lives in deep and meaningful ways. God, for those that are here this morning and have never experienced this new life in Christ, I just pray that You would speak to their hearts, that they would understand what Jesus has done for them, and that they, by faith, would receive Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Video:

"My name is Kelsey Romshek. I'm originally from Grandview, Colorado, up in the middle of the mountains, north central Colorado. My story is probably like a lot of other folks who grew up in church where, you know, I prayed the prayer when I was six years old and attended youth group. I received the message of Jesus, but I just don't remember there being much of an emphasis on relationship. God was much more of this authoritative figure. You know, yes, that God created the world, created the universe, created you and I, but you know, God was God and we're here, and you know, 'Don't sin cuz God'll strike you down with lightning. Don't sin because God'll send you to hell.' As time went on, I think I just really started to see a lot of hypocrisy, kind of seeing, you know, the Christian life for face value on the weekends but then during the week seeing totally different lives led. I was just kind of sick of it. I was kind of sick of church life. I was just kind of sick of the games and then by the time I hit college it was, 'See ya later. I'm independent, out on my own.' I really just kind of walked away from it.

I actually came to Nebraska to go to Doane College. I was an athlete; I was a football player. I got into this lifestyle where I totally lived life for the weekends—drinking beer and smoking weed was just common. That's what you did at parties to, you know, folks doing cocaine off the back of the toilet in the bathroom. I wanted to try and have sex as much as possible, score as much as possible. I'd live for the high of Friday and Saturday nights but then Sundays I'd be crushed. I'd be depressed. I'd be hung-over all day and then it was just a matter of recovering through the week and looking forward to Friday and Saturday night again. I could never get my thirst quenched for it. You know, I could never truly find fulfillment in it.

When I was in college, I was in a really bad boating accident. We were tubing behind a boat, making a turn, whipping around, and we ended up smacking into a jet ski. I broke five ribs; I broke my sternum; I gashed my lung; I compressed a vertebra in my back. It was a miracle that I was still here, but even after the accident, I kept living selfishly and kept looking for fulfillment in all the wrong areas.

When I graduated from Doane, I was in a pretty serious relationship, so I just moved to Lincoln to stay close to her, and eventually I met a bunch of firefighters and had the opportunity to start training to become a firefighter. And then I actually went through a pretty painful breakup with that gal that I stayed in Nebraska for. She had cheated on me, and I was devastated. Being six hundred miles away from my family, being all alone, you know, in this new job, new career, I just remember an immense loneliness and so I think God used that. You know, that foundation, that root was still there, and I think those difficulties caused me to truly face that. When I felt like the rug had been, you know, pulled out from underneath me, that's where I turned.

God had surrounded me with some amazing people. One of the guys in particular, Andy, was a firefighter that I worked with, and he was a huge part of that. Andy had seen some hard things and experienced some hard things in his life, but yet he still, you know, had this foundational, resolute faith. I just had a lot of respect for that. My friendship with Andy was more along the lines of, 'Hey, brother, I'm here with you and walking right here with you, and you know, let's figure this out together.' All along my journey, I think that's what truly helped me come back to God was just how people of deep faith handled me with grace.

Piper's been a huge part of my journey just from what she's seen and experienced in her life and how she encourages and inspires me. I'm thankful more than anything just for a wife who

continually points me to Jesus. God's called me to be a firefighter and, yes, I get to serve the community. Yes, I get to, you know, fight fire, protect people's homes and protect people's lives, but for me, my ministry more than anything is to the firefighters around me to, you know, help those courageous men and women find that sense of hope and peace in what I've found and what Jesus and what God have to offer.

I think growing up I never really understood that we're offered a real relationship with Jesus. While we were yet sinners, God still had a plan. While we were yet sinners, Jesus knew that He was going to go and die for us and yet still, like, made that choice. That's what grace means to me. You know, whatever happens through my highs and through my lows, I know Jesus is going to be right there walking with me."

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2016 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.