

## Resurrection Hope – Hope for the Church

For decades, the story of Christianity in the West has been one of decline. Pews emptying. Young people leaving. Churches closing. Perhaps we may have adjusted our expectations accordingly.

But recently, there have been glimpses of resurrection hope that nobody predicted. You may have seen some of these articles. There seems to be increased interest in faith from younger generations. Across Aotearoa, 660 people were baptised into the Catholic Church this Easter Sunday. In Auckland alone, 450. Last year it was 350. Similar patterns are being noticed overseas. In France, more adults were baptised at Easter last year than at any point since records began. Think about that for a second.

What's drawing them? Young people, many with no religious background at all, are searching for depth and meaning. For rootedness and healing. For authentic moral authority and guidance in a world gone mad. Christian Social media influencers seem to be a way many are discovering faith, but the real traction occurs when they encounter people living differently: with hope, joy, peace, are invited into it.

In one of the articles, one Baptist researcher said, *"What you expect determines what you see and how you act."* *What you expect determines what you see and how you act.* That is a theology of hope. In fact, it echoes the prophet Jeremiah's words we have heard to a weeping woman who had stopped expecting anything at all. This passage is instructive I believe in what God is calling us to. There are two movements to this passage. 1. To weep and pray. And 2. To expect and prepare.

### Weep and Pray

*Thus says the LORD:  
"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation and bitter weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
Refusing to be comforted for her children,  
Because they are no more."*

God speaks to a people in Exile through the image of Rachel weeping over her descendants being taken away. Refusing to be comforted, because comfort might mean accepting they're not coming back. I wonder if we've become a little too comfortable with the absence of spiritual children. We've watched people drift away. People we invested in and prayed for. When did we stop weeping for them and accept that this is just the way things are now?

Rachel *refused* that acceptance. She refused to be comforted. Refused to make peace with their absence. I wonder if this is where God might be inviting us to begin anew. Not with strategy or programs. But with weeping. To let the pain of the absence be felt again. Because it is only when we feel it that we begin to pray with urgency.

How might God be calling you to "weep for spiritual children who are no more in our midst"?

I confess I don't pray for renewal, for resurrection hope to break in, as fervently as I once did, when I would climb to the top of Mt Victoria, look out over Wellington, and pray with deep conviction that it was nothing for God to turn the city back. Somewhere along the way, that urgency softened for me.

But Rachel's weeping is heard because it is honest and costly. There's prayer that costs us nothing. And then there's the prayer of Rachel. Inconsolable. Persistent. Refusing to let go of what is absent until God responds. If we want to be a part of the new thing God is doing, we cannot outsource this to others, we must be people who once again *cry out* for spiritual children. It will look differently for all of us, but we cannot outsource desperation for resurrection hope.

So, this week, start simply: Bring one name before God. In your life groups, commit to pray together for new spiritual life and refuse to let go too quickly.

### **Expect and Prepare**

God does not leave Rachel in her weeping.

*But now this is what the LORD says:  
"Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears,  
for... there is hope for your future,  
and your children shall come back."*

To Rachel comes the comforting assurance that her children will return to her. God honours the refusal to be comforted and speaks hope into it. Will you trust in my resurrection hope? Will you trust in my doing a new thing? This invitation is echoed in the words of Isaiah spoken to a barren woman.

*"Sing, O childless woman...  
Enlarge your house; build an addition.  
Spread out your home and spare no expense!  
For you will soon be bursting at the seams."*

In other words, prepare for what you cannot yet see. We believe God is saying, prepare. Start planning. Recognise the costs and be willing to give it, for the sake of the future of the church. Not because the crowds have arrived, but because hope, and *what you expect determines what you see and how you act*. Back in those fervent days one time I was praying for renewal, I felt the Spirit say "Is the church prepared? What would you do if people started coming?" Would they be welcomed? Discipled? Safe? We cannot simply just pray and weep. Remember when Jesus said, 'pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers.' What happened next? He sent them out as the answer to their prayers. We all need to be working together, asking God to be a cross-cultural, multigenerational church. We also need to ask God how we might participate in being an answer to our weeping.

But let's be clear, this is not a call to frantic strategy and change: "Five things we need to do to attract young people." Rebranding is not renewal. And it's not what is drawing young people in. I watched a 60 Minute interview with some American Bishops about why they thought so many were coming in, and

they were perplexed as anybody! When asked why the surge, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago said, “Ah, I guess, I ah, don’t have an answer to that.” So yes, we will need to think, to plan, to adapt. But strategy must flow from prayer, it cannot replace it.

What’s drawing young people back, is not technique, but depth of meaning and purpose. Rootedness. Healing. A faith that has substance. The call is not to *try harder* or *change everything*. The call is to *enlarge your expectation*.

We don’t have to look far to see this already happening among us. We’ve been watching the tent enlarge. People are finding their way here, not just young people, but people of many ages and backgrounds who are encountering the risen Christ in this worshipping community. The question before us is not whether God is at work. The question is whether we are ready to lean into it together with greater expectation; letting resurrection hope spill out into our shared life together.

### **The Emmaus Road**

And this is where the story of Emmaus helps us. Because resurrection often arrives unrecognised. The two on the road to Emmaus reveal that we can often **not see** the new thing that God is doing. We can be expecting things to be like they were before, but God shows up in new and unexpected ways.

Two disciples, walking away from Jerusalem. Downcast and fearful. But they are *talking*. Processing, wrestling, searching. Isn’t that what so many people are doing right now? Online, in podcasts, in late-night conversations, talking about things that matter. Asking, with more urgency than at least my generation did: *is there something real? Is there hope?*

Into that conversation, Jesus draws near. *“What are you discussing?”* he asks. Jesus models a kind of evangelism that works better now than it has in my lifetime. **The direct ask.** Gone are the days of beating around the bush when it comes to faith, meaning and religion. There’s a hunger for deep conversations in a shallow world. There’s a willingness to be challenged. I messaged a young man this week who’s drifted: *Oi mate, come back to church — you’re missed.* He wrote back: *Okay.* People are more open than we assume. Now is a time for presence, attention and the boldness to directly ask.

But Jesus doesn’t just walk alongside and validate their confusion. He **opens the scriptures**. He teaches. Something happens they can’t quite explain: *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road?”* Last week, Charmaine wonderfully shared the importance of doubt as an aspect of our faith. And this is true. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, certainty is. However, I think there is also a hunger for conviction, a confident faith even if not full of certainty. My generation was all about “deconstruction.” Many of my peers doubted themselves right out the door. A generation that is Biblically and spiritually illiterate are searching for robust containers of meaning. For faith that can

hold the weight of today's world. Does the depth of grace and wisdom and truth we carry and know set the hearts of seekers aflame?

And finally, it was **at the table**, when he took the bread and blessed it and broke it, that they saw. They recognised him in the meal shared, the embodied life together. Yes, in its sacramental form, and it is interesting that this "something new" is taking place in strongly sacramental traditions. But I think more importantly, in our lives together. I do not think we can overestimate the importance of opening our homes, inviting people over, and sharing a meal together. A recent Newsroom article by AUT chancellor Rob Campbell put it starkly: *we are becoming a nation of strangers. The institutions that once created belonging (churches, clubs, schools) have been turned into agents of transaction, individuality and isolation.* (Loneliness) Thick, embodied, inconvenient life of community together is a form of resistance. When we open our tables, we are not just being hospitable, we are pushing back against one of the defining features of our moment. Yes, we live in a very challenging city socially, and we live in a challenging time with the cost of living, that feels like a huge barrier because we can have ideas of what it means to host people for a meal. (time of crisis). But it is only in the breaking of the bread together that people new to faith really experience the hospitality and love of God through us.

### **What's the invitation?**

God is stirring this in us, but it is not something the staff team alone can do. Renewal won't be manufactured. But it may be recognised, by communities who commit to weeping and praying, to expecting and preparing, and to the slow faithful work of walking alongside, opening Scripture, and sharing their tables with new people.

People are already searching, already talking and carrying questions. Their hearts may already be burning. Many just need somewhere to recognise it. There is a shift happening, and what we expect will determine what we see and how we act. Spiritual children are coming back. The question is whether we will have the tent ready when they do.

### **Reflection Questions**

- When did you last weep or pray with real urgency for someone who is no longer in our midst? Who is God bringing to your mind today?
- Where might you already be enlarging the tent, and where is God inviting you to go further?
- Who in your life is already on the road: searching, talking, carrying questions? What would it look like to draw near and ask: what are you discussing?

If this is stirring something in you we want to hear from you.