

## The Exclamation Point on Grace!

-In the last weeks, you may have read about a senior prank gone terribly wrong in Gainesville, Florida. Jason Hughes was a forty-year-old math teacher, much beloved by his students at North Hall High School. He coached football. He led a Bible study for the coaching staff. He mentored students through the warmth of earned relationships. Jason had posted that he, his wife, Laura, and their two young sons, had moved to Gainesville years before with a sense of calling, eager to (quote) 'see how God would move' there.

It was part of the tradition at North Hall High for seniors to prank their teachers. So Coach Hughes knew his students would be coming to his house to roll the trees with toilet paper. These were his athletes. Students he loved. And he was watching for them, happily looking forward to surprising them in the act.

So late on a Friday night, five of Jason's boys showed up. They had begun rapping the trees with toilet paper when Hughes happily sprang out of his house to chase them down. The boys jumped into their truck to get away. But in hot pursuit, Jason tripped and spilled into the dark street, right into the path of the truck's pulling out. He was struck. And though the students jumped out, called for emergency responders, and tried to help, Jason Hughes – husband, father, teacher, coach, apprentice of Jesus – could not be saved from his injuries. He died that night./

You can just feel the gut punch of shock and grief for Jason's family, friends, community – to lose this man no one could bear to be without. And you can feel the weight of guilt for the students involved that night – to sit staring at recorded heartbreak set on repeat.

But then, to top off tragedy, came the sheriff. He booked the five young men with multiple offenses. Most severe: the eighteen-year-old driver was charged with felony vehicular homicide. It's a charge that carries between three and fifteen years in prison.//

Now Jason's wife, Laura, had also come to Gainesville with a sense of God's purpose to teach in the same high school. And even in her shock and devastation, Laura refused to turn to bitterness or blame. Instead, she advocated for Jason's boys. She shared with authorities how her husband loved them. 'This is a terrible tragedy,' she wrote. 'And our family is determined to prevent a separate tragedy from occurring, ruining the lives of these students.'

To do so would be counter to Jason's lifelong aim to invest in them. It would be counter to his family's hope in forgiving love. So Laura Hughes urged the State of Georgia to mirror mercy. She insisted that into their sadness and shame come healing hope. She begged them to drop the charges...

And they did./

The charges were dropped. All tears could flow freely. And the long road to healing could begin with a redeeming yellow ray of Easter hope. The boy driving the truck has written about how 'God is on the move' in him in the surprising love he's experienced: 'I pledge to live ... my life in a manner that honors the memory of Coach Hughes by exemplifying Christ. He will never be forgotten.'//

-Friends, we know the world is fractured by tragedy, guilt and grief of far more than accidental proportions, don't we? War. Loneliness. Division. Doomscrolling. Poverty. Mental health crisis. Children in harm's way. We don't need Scripture to tell us things aren't the way they should be. And we'd be lying to ourselves to say that we don't find ourselves in the driver's seat.

But today we've come to celebrate the event by which our God is redeeming the tragedy, renewing our lives, and remaking the world by his grace.

The charges have been dropped.

Are you in need of being surprised anew by the heart of our Easter hope?

-Please stand if you are able for the reading of Scripture. This is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 1-20. Can you hear it as a heartening Word to you and me?]

15 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the good news I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures 4 and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures 5 and that he appeared – to Peter, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive.... 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles [that is, all those interrupted by the risen Jesus, remade by grace, and sent to tell the story].

8 Last of all, as to one untimely born (that is, late to the game), Christ appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you believed.

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ... 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 [And] If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied –

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead....!

Brothers and sisters, Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!

Let's pray: Lord, open our hearts to welcome the good news of resurrection, that we might be raised to new life by the grace of our Easter hope. Amen.

-OK. So the Apostle Paul is writing to this young-in-faith congregation of apprentices to the Way of Jesus in Southern Greece. In the city of Corinth.

Corinth was this anxious, hedonistic, status-driven, divided and messy place. And the young church there was known for its own struggles with comparison, fractured relationships, moral confusion, division and doubt. In Jesus they had found a centering hope that the human story – that history itself – was unfolding in the direction of his larger Love. But the world around them was dispiriting. And they found they disappointed even themselves.

This left them on shifting ground, wondering: Is this faith really changing anything in me or in the world?

-It's into this unsteadiness and doubt that Paul again proclaims good news. To recall the saving center. The solid ground. The truth of first importance. The simple gospel. Did you hear it?

Christ died for our sins. Christ was buried. Christ was raised. Christ appeared.

Paul writes to remind not only them, but us, of Who God is and who we are in his love. To quote Will Collier: 'Jesus reveals how the whole human story, beginning to end, is God moving toward us. God descending into our trouble and gloom. God ... consuming within his own self our [sin and] pain and heartbreak. God [preferring to die over leaving] us alone in our suffering' (Day 9, 40-17 Lenten Devotional). And I'll add, God vindicating that movement of love by overcoming death.

This is the gospel. This is God on the move. Christ died. Christ was buried. Christ was raised. His mercy is real. The tomb is empty. The charges are dropped. And our Savior lives.

-And notice. This sacrificial death. This movement of grace. This resurrection. It's no parable. No mere metaphor. No wishful thinking.

Christ appeared.

Paul starts naming witnesses – Peter, the twelve, more than five hundred, James... 'most of whom are still alive,' he says, as if to say: 'go ask them yourself.' And then he says something striking: 'Last of all...Jesus appeared also to me.'

-And that's where this becomes personal. Because now it's no longer just about Jesus' story. It's about Paul's. And Paul wants us to know for our own sake. He's not supposed to be in this story. 'I am the least of the apostles,' he says. 'Unfit... because I persecuted the church of God.' Maybe you remember how as a young man Paul breathed murder against those beginning to follow Jesus. He knows what he's done. He knows who he's harmed. He knows that the deaths he drove were no mere accident.

If anyone should count himself disqualified from God's embrace, it's Paul. But Paul wants to bear witness that the resurrection gets personal. 'By the grace of God I am what I am,' he says.

Not 'I made up for it.' Not 'I turned things around.' No. 'By the grace of God.' By unmerited mercy. The risen Jesus appeared to Paul with enemy love. And Paul would have the Corinthians – Paul would have us – know that his whole life is now built on something he didn't deserve and couldn't accomplish for himself.

The charges have been dropped.

And that's grace. Grace refuses to let guilt be the final word. Grace redeems tragedy with forgiving compassion. As with the boys in that truck. As with a grieving wife who chose mercy instead of bitter blame. As with the young driver who thought his life was over but now lives for the love of Christ.

-Are you needing to hear the truth of God's grace for you?

A story I hold onto to remind me of how God's love is on the move to remake me is about Larry Trapp (whom some of you will recall from Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace*). Larry Trapp was a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. He was based in Lincoln, Nebraska. And when a Jewish worship leader, a cantor, moved to town, Larry began sending hate mail denying the Holocaust, leaving Nazi propaganda in this leader's mailbox, and making

threatening phone calls. You can imagine how frightening it would be – to have someone actually threatening to harm your family.

But this cantor of their local synagogue responded in a surprising way. One day, instead of hanging up on Larry, he stayed on the line. He aimed to engage Larry's threat with compassion. Larry hung up. But it happened several more times. A voice of compassion. A genuine interest in Larry's life. And so a conversation began.

The cantor learned Larry had lived with diabetes since childhood. He found out he was in a wheelchair, that he was going blind. Eventually they met. Oddly, beautifully, this Jewish family began to show up in Larry's life. They brought him groceries. They took him to the physician. And finally, they invited Larry Trapp, into their home to provide care for him as his health declined.

Grace interrupted the story and redeemed it. Larry renounced his role in the Klan. He destroyed his hate literature. He burned his Nazi flags. And before he died, he traveled to apologize – to Jewish communities, to Black communities – for the ignorance and injury he had spread.

He told anyone who would listen how the undeserved Love of a Jewish man had saved his life and filled it with purpose.

-Now the church in Corinth was likely not the first to get discouraged. To question the resurrection.

But can you see why Paul's reply was so passionate? ('How can some of you say that there is no resurrection?') Can you see why he's so adamant that if Christ has not been raised, our hope is hollow and our faith in vain?

Beyond his own experience of Christ appearing, beyond even the hundreds of witnesses he points to, here's the heart of what he's longing for them to trust: The resurrection serves as the exclamation point on the grace of Christ.

Without the resurrection, the grace of Christ is a beautiful idea that dies on a cross. But in light of the resurrection, the grace of Christ is vindicated as the reality that governs the world.

Without the resurrection, Jesus' prayer from the cross, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do,' is a failed experiment in profound generosity.

But if God has raised Jesus from the dead, then his sacrificial love has been revealed as the heart of what's really real.

Sin forgiven. Death undone. Tragedy redeemed. Hurts healed. A world being remade by the living power of love.

- Friends there's plenty to make the ground under our feet feel shaky. Plenty that could cause us doubt. Plenty of our own guilt and grief that could pull us under.

I want to remind you of the good news of who God is and who you are. The gospel many of you've received, on which so many have found a solid place to stand.

By this you are saved from despair. By this you are rescued from the blame and bitterness of the world.

Christ died for our sins. Christ was buried. Christ is risen. Christ has appeared.

And that means:

The charges are dropped. Grace is Alive. God is on the move.

And the love of Jesus is what's really real!

So take heart, my Friends. Take hope.

Christ is risen!  
He's risen indeed!

Alleluia! Amen!