

“A New Birth into a Living Hope”

John 20:19-31; 1 Peter 1:3-9

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Easter II

Today is the second Sunday in the season of Easter for the majority of Christians around the globe. But some Christians are actually celebrating Easter *today*. The Orthodox Church – which is prevalent in Eastern Europe and some other parts of the globe – follows a different calendar than we do. So even as we think back to the Easter celebrations of a week ago (such as they were, cooped up in our homes!), about one out of every eight Christians is celebrating Easter *right now*. They’re hearing the story of what happened Easter *morning* ... while we hear the story of what happened Easter *evening*.

John tells the familiar story. On Easter evening – just a dozen or so hours after the women showed up at the tomb – a number of Jesus’ disciples had gathered together in someone’s house. They had locked the doors to make sure they’d be safe. Jesus shows up – locked doors can’t keep Jesus out! – and he shows them the places on his body where he had been pierced. But the apostle Thomas wasn’t there when that event took place, and he didn’t believe his fellow disciples when they told him. He utters his famous line: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (Hence the expression, “doubting Thomas.”)

A week later, the disciples gather together again. The doors are still shut tight. Thomas is with them this time. Jesus shows up again. He invites Thomas to put his fingers in the spots where he had been pierced. Thomas is amazed to discover: this really is the *very same Jesus* who had been nailed to the cross and pierced in the side. He is not dead. He’s *alive!* Thomas exclaims: “My Lord and my God!”

Why did Thomas exclaim like that? I’ll come back to that later. For now, let’s turn our attention to a somewhat less familiar passage, that really beautiful paragraph near the beginning of the first letter of the apostle Peter. Peter wrote this letter many years later, after churches had been established throughout various parts of what is now the country of Turkey. He sent this letter to those churches to give them encouragement, as they were undergoing some form of discrimination or persecution. They were going through “various trials” (1 Peter 1:6); they were being “tested by fire” (1:7); they were suffering “for doing good” (3:17); some people were accusing the Christians of being “evildoers” (2:12). We may not know what it’s really like to be persecuted, what it’s really like to be falsely accused of doing evil, but we certainly can relate to “various trials” and being “tested by fire,” especially in the midst of this pandemic which has unhinged the whole world. So I want you to hear these words *as if Peter were talking directly to you*. I’m going to walk through them slowly, carefully, deliberately.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” God has given us a

new birth. It's like we've come out of a dark womb into a whole new world, a world filled with splendor and light. We've come through a narrow passage and are now safely held snug in the tender arms of our loving mother. We're the same people we used to be – *and yet we're not*. The world has changed; everything around us is fresh and new. God did this out of his great mercy, his great *compassion* for us. In this new world we experience a *living hope*. Not a *dead* hope, not an *empty* hope, but a *real* hope, something we can truly *hold onto* and believe in *with our whole being*, something that fills us with a magnitude of *joy*. God has given us this new birth into a living hope *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*. Christ's resurrection isn't just an event that happened long ago – it also has far-reaching consequences *here and now*. It *changes us*! It brings us into a new world; it gives us hope!

“And,” Peter continues, “into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” This “new birth” that we experience also brings us into an *inheritance*. God has given us something of *enormous value*, something that has been planned for us from long ago. It's like God wrote a will, and put *your name* down as one of the primary beneficiaries of God's great estate. This inheritance that we receive is imperishable – nothing, and no one, can ever destroy it. It's undefiled – there's nothing anywhere that can spoil it or ruin it in any way. And it's unfading. It won't just disappear; it won't dry up; it won't wither away. When the stock market crashes, *it will still be there*, every single last bit of it. It's never going to shrink or diminish. It's “kept in heaven for you.” That's better than a bank. It's safer than a vault. It's more impenetrable than Fort Knox. It's like God has kept this inheritance for us in the most protected fortress imaginable. *No one* can break in and steal it!

This inheritance is for *you* – you who “are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” *God is at work protecting you*. His great power is covering you with a magnificent shield. He's doing this on account of faith – *your* faith; *your* belief and trust in him; *your* confidence in his magnificent love for you. He's protecting you because he wants to make sure that you will be able to receive his great gifts for you, the *salvation* that has been prepared for you, that grand *rescue*, that great *healing*, that final deliverance from *everything* in this universe that would do you harm. It's a salvation that he will reveal to you in all its fullness at the right time. The inheritance is waiting for us. It's not going anywhere; but we don't receive it in full just yet!

“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials.” Yes, of *course* we rejoice; who *wouldn't* rejoice, when we know with conviction and certainty that God loves us *this much*, that God does *such great things* even for the likes of *me*! We can rejoice in God's great promises *even if, for a little while, we have to suffer various trials*. What we're going through right now is not easy. The Christians who read Peter's letter back then were dealing with discrimination or persecution; those of us who are reading the same letter today are dealing with a global pandemic and the enormous ripple effect that has impacted absolutely everybody. *Sometimes we go through periods where we have to suffer various trials*. The early Christians had their trials ... we have our own. *But the thing is ... we can still rejoice in the magnificent power and love of God, even in the midst of our trials*. That's not to deny that the trials are happening. It's not a form of *escape* from the sufferings of this world. But it is a source of great *comfort*. *We know* – beyond any shadow of a doubt! – *that God loves us*. That God loves us *immensely*. That God *cares* for us, and has *provided* for us, and will ultimately *deliver* us from *this* world, filled with suffering and pain, into someplace better. Someplace ... *perfect*.

We suffer these trials, Peter says, “so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and

honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Be careful with this verse. Peter is *not* saying that the various sufferings and trials in the world exist *solely* as a means of testing us. There are other factors at work, demonic factors, bent on killing and destroying God’s beautiful creation. The New Testament talks at length about those in other places. What Peter is talking about here is *the impact* that trials and tribulations have *on us*. When suffering comes – whether it comes about as a result of discrimination or persecution or a highly contagious disease – *how do we respond?* How do we *react* to the difficult situation we find ourselves in? That’s what Peter is going after here. “So that the *genuineness* of your faith may be found,” he says. How true, *really*, is our faith in God? Times like these can put it to the test. Peter makes an analogy to the process of refining gold. Gold, one of the world’s most valuable commodities, has to be *refined*, in order for it to be its *best*. From ancient times, craftsmen would sit next to a hot fire, with molten gold in a crucible. The hot fire would reveal the impurities in the gold, the “dross,” it was called; these would rise to the top, and the craftsman would skim them off. The result would be gold that was *better* than it was before. More *pure*. More ... *holy*, if you will. Peter says that when we go through trials, *it’s like we’re gold, in the process of being refined*. Our weaknesses, our infirmities, the parts of us that really aren’t very holy, become *readily* apparent, visible for *everyone* to see. Have you been crabby lately? Impatient? Frustrated? Discouraged? Afraid? Me too! Our weaknesses are *plainly* visible! We’re in a crucible of our own; there’s a Craftsman trying to perfect us; *what we need to do is allow our impurities to become visible*, so that He – and we – can *do something about them*. Can ... *refine* them. *Deal* with them, *address* them, let our Master Craftsman *excise* them from our bodies and our souls. The result: a *more purified us*. A more purified *you*. And, at the end of the story, “praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed,” because God has cared about us *so much* that he has helped to *rid* us of the weaknesses and infirmities that stain our souls.

“Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.” No, we haven’t seen Jesus, not in the flesh, not in the way Thomas did. *But we still love him*. We still feel his presence *with us*. We still *believe* in him, and we still *rejoice*, we give thanks and sing, “with an indescribable and glorious joy.” That is, if we *really do trust in him*, really do believe that he has given us this *new birth into a living hope*, really do believe that there is this *glorious* inheritance waiting for us, with *love* written all over it.

“For,” Peter says, “you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Our faith *leads* to something; it has a *result*; there’s an *end game*. It’s called *salvation*. The ultimate healing, restoration, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, deliverance, and peace. *Rest* and *joy* for our weary souls.

Which brings us back to why Thomas exclaimed as he did: “My Lord and my God!” He realized, in that moment, *just how great* God’s love was, that Jesus died and rose ... *for him*. Not just *that* it happened ... but *why* it happened. It happened ... *for him*. So that *he* could receive God’s great gifts.

It happened ... *for you*. So that *you* could receive God’s great gifts.

John ends with these words: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” That’s what this is all about: not just belief that some event happened long ago, not just assent to a set of doctrines or teachings, but so that *something wonderful* will happen *to you*: so that you may have *life* in his name.

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