

A Living Hope
1 Peter 1:3-9, Psalm 16
May 1, 2011

This morning is referred to by some as “Low Sunday” on the Christian calendar. Why “low Sunday?” Well, for one reason, attendance is much lower this Sunday than it was last Sunday, Easter Sunday. Fortunately we do not see the fluctuations in attendance that many churches see on Easter Sunday, where the crowds come out on Easter, but then disappear for the remainder of the year, with the possible exception of Christmas. But even for fairly regular church attenders, the first Sunday after Easter is usually “low Sunday.” All the preparation, excitement and build up throughout Lent leading into Easter Sunday. Then the celebration on Easter morning. And before we know it, it is gone. Oh, we human beings are so fickle. The word “fickle” meaning “changeable, especially as regards to one’s loyalties.” The highs and lows of life. I think we experience them today more than at any time in human history, but they have been present throughout history.

The excitement of that first Easter morning 2,000 years ago was soon replaced by the realities of human life. The disciples retreated back to their rooms. Although the Scripture last week said that the other disciple saw and believed, they didn’t quite know what to make of it all. Yea, the stone had been removed, Jesus’ body was gone, the linen burial cloths were folded so neatly, and Mary came running saying, “I have seen the Lord!” But what did it all mean? Faith is such a fickle thing.

I said last week that we are much more like Peter and that other disciple on that first Easter morning. Whereas Mary Magdalene saw and experienced the risen Jesus that first Easter morning, Peter and the other disciple were presented with the evidence. Of course, the risen Jesus would later appear to them, but in the big scheme of things, the risen Savior didn’t appear to all that many people. The Bible tells us that only about 500 persons ever saw the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:5-8).

And we have the disciple, now known as “doubting Thomas,” who just wouldn’t take the other disciples word for it:

But Thomas was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told them, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the door were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put you finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other things 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. John 20:24-31

If we're waiting to see Jesus in person, or to put our fingers in the nail marks, or our hands in his side, to put our faith in him, we're in trouble. We tend to think that it must have been easier back then for those who saw the resurrected Jesus in person. But was it? Because Matthew (28:17) tells us that not all, even those who called themselves Jesus' disciples while he was here on earth, and saw the risen Christ, not all were convinced after they did. Some still doubted. And isn't it kind of odd that even after the risen Jesus appeared to some 500 people, only 120 were gathered in the upper room awaiting the promised Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Yes, human faith is fickle.

Fortunately for Peter, he was one of the 120. This morning we are beginning a brief look at the Book of 1st Peter. As best we can tell, the letter of 1st Peter was written by the disciple Peter himself, somewhere around 62-64 A.D., 30 years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. It was written with the intent that the letter would be passed around from church to church in the area of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), encouraging the early Christians to be true to the faith. If there is one verse which captures the theme of the entire letter best, it is found in 1 Peter 4:19 - "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."

Peter begins his letter in much the same way that many of the other letters in the N.T. begin, with a welcome or an introduction, most often telling us who wrote it and who it is addressed to: *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ*. In the very beginning days of the church, the word "apostle" was a very unique term. It was used to refer to one who had been one of Jesus' original 12 disciples. It was one of the criteria for a writing to be included in the New Testament canon. Most of them are written by an original disciple, or a scribe of an original disciple, or in the case of the apostle Paul, one who had experienced the resurrected Jesus. The term "apostle" was reserved for a select few, much like the term "prophet" in the Old Testament.

Then Paul tells us who his letter is addressed to: *To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout* (the world in general, but specifically) *Pontus, Galatia Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia*. The area that made up most of the area between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, the area where Christianity had spread during its first thirty years and where Christians were now suffering persecution. "To God's elect," "the chosen," "strangers or aliens who have been dispersed throughout the world." For many Christians, we have lost that sense of chosenness and set-apartness from the rest of the world. To those *who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood*.

Right at the beginning of Peter's letter we find the triune nature of God. "The foreknowledge of God the Father," a phrase which means more than just God simply knowing what will take place in the future, who is going to respond to his chosenness, or not. The term also means God's plan for a special relationship with his people, even from before creation. His special plans for his people. "Chosen by God" even before time began. That element of past. Then we have "the

sanctifying work of the Spirit,” which is present with us today for those who put their faith in Jesus. And the purpose - “for obedience to Jesus Christ,” which has been accomplished only through the “sprinkling of his blood.” The writer of Hebrews (5:8-9) tells us: “*Although he was a son (referring to Jesus, the Son of God), he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect (through his death on the cross), he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*” “Eternal salvation,” not for everyone, not for those who just believe, but for all who obey Jesus. Inherent in the word “believe” is obedience to Jesus. Jesus said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8) We have been chosen by God from the time of the past, even before creation, for obedience to Jesus Christ, which is working in us today through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (present), fulfilled by the sprinkling of his blood and upon His coming again.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into **a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*

v. 3-5

“A living hope” - a confident expectation of the life to come. Made possible only through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Did you ever notice that some of the most hopeful people are older Christians as they get closer and closer to their death here on earth. If we’re putting our ultimate hope in our life here on earth, then we’re all going to be disappointed. Peter’s words, as well as the words of all the other writers of the New Testament, directly clash with all those who are preaching the so called “prosperity gospel” today. God never promises material prosperity as a reward here on earth. In fact just the opposite may be true. If we’re putting our hope in our money and financial rewards, God says through the apostle James (2:5), “God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him.” Or if you’re putting your hope in your physical bodies and your health, he says through the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 4:16), “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Or, if you feel you are going to be accepted more because you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, confessed him as Savior and Lord, think again. Peter (1 Peter 4:14) tells us in a couple of chapters ahead, “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory, and of God rests on you.” Jesus (Matthew 5:11-12) himself said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” The reward for Christians is not here on earth. This is only temporary and passing away. The reward is in heaven which is eternal and never fading. “A living hope” in a better tomorrow, a resurrected life through Jesus Christ.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

v. 6-7

Faith is not faith unless it is “genuinely proven.” God tests and refines and purifies the faith of his people as precious metal is refined in a fire. It says in Isaiah 48:10, “I have tested you in the

furnace of affliction.” Peter says we may never receive or see the reward here on earth. We are tested here on earth so our faith may be proved genuine, *and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.* That is at the end of this time.

God’s purposes in present grief are usually not known when we are experiencing them. Often they are only known when we look back many months or years later. But that is not always the case. Some may never be known during our life here on earth. Some of God’s purposes will not be known until we die and go to be with the Lord. And then you might not even care.

It is those times when the reason for our suffering and hardship cannot be seen that our faith becomes more purified and genuine, and more precious in His sight:

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, v. 8

The Greek word used there for love is agape. The same love that God showed for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Not just a feeling or an emotion, or sensual or sexual, but one involving sacrifice. One in which you would give up everything for. “Filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” “Inexpressible,” you can’t express it. Both joy and hope are difficult emotions to express. But you know when they are there. And when they are not. And others around you know as well. The emotion of “Joy” is in contrast to the modern day emotion of happiness which is a state of feeling dependent on everything turning out all right, especially the way I want. “Hope” is being able to see past the temporary struggles and suffering involved in our earthly life. Hope is being able to see past the events of “Good Friday” with the anticipation of Easter morning, not just for Jesus, but in our lives as well.

Peter says that suffering grief and inexpressible joy are both normal parts of the Christian life. They can even be held together simultaneously. Grief arises because of the many difficulties we encounter in this fallen world. Joy comes when we can look past the present difficulties, through the eyes of faith, into the unseen reality of the better world to come.

And the goal of it all? *For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls* (v. 9). Salvation is both a one time event and something that occurs over time. Achieved only by the blood of Jesus Christ, shed once for all on the cross, and then working through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Which is why Paul says, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil 2:12-13). Our salvation is a gift from God, accomplished only through Jesus’ death on the cross. But we have a part in it as well. Believing, accepting Jesus by faith, and allowing His Spirit to work within us.