

THE ABIDING MEANING OF EASTER

Sermon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, 2017

1 Peter 1:3-9

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, 1 Peter 1:3-9: **<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has given us new birth by His great mercy, through raising Jesus Christ from the dead. Therefore we have a living hope, <sup>4</sup> which waits for an inheritance that cannot be destroyed or defiled and never fades away, and that God has reserved for you in heaven. <sup>5</sup> You are protected by God's power through faith, until you come to the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you greatly rejoice, even though now, for a little while, if it is necessary, you have been suffering grief in various trials. <sup>7</sup> These sufferings have come so that your faith may be proved genuine. It is more precious than gold, which perishes, although it is tested by fire. Then the tested genuineness of your faith will result in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup> Although you have not seen Him, you love Him. You do not see Him now, but you believe in Him, and rejoice with unspeakable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup> because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We are living in the afterglow of Easter. Our souls still skip for joy at the words of the angel, "*Do not be afraid!... He has risen from the dead!...*" (Matt. 28:5, 7). We share the women's joy and the apostles' wonder. With the Emmaus disciples, our hearts burn within us as the Scriptures are fulfilled and the Saviour is revealed.

Over the Easter long weekend, there were numerous caravans and campers on the road as people packed up and went away for the long weekend. For them, Easter was just an annual holiday, something to be prepared for, celebrated, and then forgotten. For others, Easter was just an occasion for them to pay their "Easter duty" and go to church. Along with Christmas Day, weddings and funerals, that's about the only time they ever set foot in the church.

But Easter is not simply an event. Easter is the foundation of our Christian faith, the dynamic of our Christian life. The meaning of Easter, therefore, is of surpassing importance. Easter Day has come and gone. But the meaning of Easter abides forever. Why? Well first of all, Easter means that we can *hope*.

At the time when Peter wrote his First Letter, many Christians were beginning to suffer for their faith, and began to doubt whether God still loved them or noticed their trouble or could do anything about it. Peter's response was to burst out into some great doxology of praise. In the original Greek, our text is really one long sentence - a river of glory given to God for His greatness and great gifts to undeserving people. Peter begins by saying, <sup>3</sup> **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has given us new birth by His great mercy, through raising Jesus Christ from the dead.**

We are by nature spiritually dead. Contrary to popular belief, there is within us *no* spark of spiritual life, *no* capacity for spiritual growth. Instead, God has had mercy on our wretched, lost estate and has **given us new birth**, made us new creatures, given us new life **through raising Jesus Christ from the dead**. Our redemption and eternal life are guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus, the firstborn from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

While in our own country we have not been called to suffer for our faith as much as those Christians in Peter's time, yet that day could be coming. For all we know, it could be just around the corner. But if something is taken away from us, whether it be our freedom, dignity, health, or worldly goods, it is comforting to remember which treasures cannot be taken from us: the **great mercy** of God, which includes the new birth of Holy Baptism, and the heavenly **inheritance that cannot be destroyed or defiled and never fades away**. The good things that Christ gives will never fail because they are based on an irreversible historical fact - *Christ's resurrection from the dead*. He lives; and because He lives, hope lives too.

The apostle describes this hope as **a living hope**, for it is drawn from a *living* God, having for its guarantee a *living* Saviour.

Jesus is not a dead hero, some kind of noble martyr, or a living legend. No, He is a living Lord. As His life is real, so His resurrection is real. And as His resurrection is real, so our hope is real.

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 1:18

Easter means, therefore, that we can hope: hope in the abiding power of His resurrection in our lives; hope in the resurrection of our own bodies from the grave; hope in the glad reunion with our loved ones gone to heaven before us; and hope in the eternal vision of our resurrected Lord.

Peter describes this object of our hope as **an inheritance that cannot be destroyed or defiled and never fades away, and that God has reserved for (us) in heaven**. The resurrection hope is our inheritance - bequeathed to us by our gracious Father as the eternal heritage of His children. This inheritance **cannot be destroyed or defiled** - for this is a treasure which neither moth nor rust can destroy and which robbers cannot steal.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this inheritance is **reserved for (us) in heaven**, our true home. Nothing in this world can take our inheritance from us. It is kept in trust for us by the promise and power of God, in the stronghold of His everlasting arms.

By virtue of that promise and that power, we are **protected by God's power through faith, until (we) come to the salvation...** Through faith in the atoning merits and victorious resurrection of His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus, we cling to the promises of God and make His life our own. Thus He guarantees to us salvation - that salvation which is both our present possession and our future inheritance. That salvation is the object of our hope and the cause for our rejoicing!

What great comfort this surely brings us in an uneasy world. Already having that salvation, we know its power, we feel its joy, and we share its blessings. But we rejoice also because the full measure of the power and joy and blessing of that salvation will **be revealed in the last time**. For us, the best is yet to come.

But before the best comes, we must experience something of the worst. Christ could not taste the triumph of Easter before He had suffered the ordeal of Good Friday. "Through the cross to the crown" was the experience of the Saviour. "Through the cross to the crown" is an axiom of the Christian life. Therefore, our text goes on to show that we must suffer.

The Apostle Peter goes on to warn in our text that the Christian's joy of salvation will be tempered with suffering. He writes, <sup>6</sup> **In this you greatly rejoice, even**

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:20

**though now, for a little while, if it is necessary, you have been suffering grief in various trials.**

It is no accident that Jesus taught His disciples, and us, to pray, “*Lead us not into temptation.*” Temptations are such an inevitable part of the Christian’s experience that we need a full measure of God’s help to ward them off or to soften their impact. In every stage and circumstance of life, temptations beset us: the lure of the world, the pride of life, the concern for things - things of the body, things of the day, things that must surely pass away.

The devil is full with ideas as to how he may effect our spiritual ruin. The Bible we neglect to read, the hands that we forget to fold, the love that we disdain to show; the hasty word, the jealous thought, the vain ambition - these all are the devil’s devices. Thus he would tempt us away from God. But of all the temptations to which we are exposed, the worst must surely be this: that we feel immune to temptation.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, then we know that we feel the Tempter’s thrusts every step of the way through life. We walk in danger all the way. Writing a little later in this same letter, Peter warns, “*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” (1 Peter 5:8). We know those words are true. Having the pressure of temptation can fill us with the **suffering** of which the apostle speaks in our text.

But we suffer not only because the devil tempts us to sin, but also because our patience and hope are so often tested through various trials. Sickness in the home, problems at work, anxiety about the future, the unfaithfulness of friends, financial reversals, the intrusion of death into the family circle - all these are sore trials indeed for even the best of Christians. These are part of the heavy load he must bear as he makes his way through life.

But these trials and temptations, grievous as they are, are part of God’s design for our life. In fact, Peter says that God regards them as **precious**, and he compares them to **gold**. The comparison is apt. As gold must be **tested by fire**, so as to emerge bright and pure, so sometimes we must be tried in the furnace of affliction, to purge away the dross of sin and cleanse us from the alloy of unbelief. And, Peter argues, if this purging process is necessary in the case of perishable gold, how much more important it is for the imperishable soul of man!

But, even while he indicates that trouble is our inevitable lot, the apostle sounds a note of optimism. These troubles, he assures us, will only be **for a little while**. They will last only so long as God thinks that they will benefit us. And these troubles will befall us, only **if it is necessary**. God's aim is not to punish, but to bless. For, after all, the promise of God holds good: <sup>13</sup> *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it,*" (1 Cor. 10:13). Because God has promised to remain with His people, we are never left in a losing situation.

God's purpose in sending us the cross is not to make us suffer and squirm. He does not enjoy our misery. He intends only our good - that we may love Him more and serve Him better; that our lives may be more useful to our neighbour and more in harmony with His will. Our text puts it this way: <sup>7</sup> **These sufferings have come so that your faith... will result in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.**

At His coming, Jesus will dry our tears and bind up our wounds and calm our troubled hearts. Then there will be gladness instead of mourning, songs instead of sighs, peace instead of strife. Then at last we shall see how our faithfulness in trial, our resistance to temptation, and our hope amid afflictions have all combined to glorify His name and prove Him to be our faithful and unfailing God. And that God, we shall behold and serve and worship **when Jesus Christ is revealed**.

This sure and dauntless hope is ours in special measure again this Eastertide. For in the victory of our resurrected Lord we see the full and final meaning of Easter for ourselves: Easter means that we shall triumph.

St. Peter assures us that, come trial and temptation and all the assaults of hell, we shall nevertheless be **protected by God's power**. And this safekeeping will continue until **Jesus Christ is revealed**. And of this Christ the apostle says, <sup>8</sup> **Although you have not seen Him, you love Him**. In human relationships, it is unthinkable that we should love someone whom we have never seen. But our fellowship with Christ is of a higher order. He who died for our sins - shall we not love Him? He who has made us His own - shall we not love Him? He who cleanses our heart - shall we not love Him? Indeed, *"we love Him because He first loved us,"* (1 John 4:19).

This is a kind of love that does not depend upon sight. Our union with Christ is not a sight relationship, but a faith relationship. Our text makes this plain: **“You do not see Him now, but you believe in Him, and rejoice with unspeakable and glorious joy.”** Our fellowship with Christ brings present joy and future glory.

This glory will be the consummation of our faith and our eternal salvation. Our text concludes: **“because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”**

This, then, is the meaning of Easter for us: Because Christ rose, we, too, shall rise. Because He conquered the evil Foe, we shall eternally share in His triumph. Because He lives, we, too, shall live. No, rather, because He lives, eternal life is ours already here and now!

Easter means that life is hope. Easter means that we have passed through suffering. Easter means that our victory is sure. Easter means that all through life He will guide us with His counsel and afterward receive us into glory. May it be so! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

God of all grace, mercy, and peace, we praise You that, by raising Jesus from the dead, You have shown that He is Your Son, and our Saviour. We praise You also that our faith stands on the fulfilment of the prophecies about Him in the Old Testament Scriptures, and on the sure record of the apostles as eyewitnesses of the risen Lord. Give us also the witness of Your Spirit that we may firmly believe Your saving truth.

We thank You for the precious gift of eternal life in Your Son. Protect us from the deceptions of the world about us, and enable us to hold firmly to the faith we profess. Deliver us from doubt and despair. Prevent us from being deceived by worthless human wisdom. Fill us with the Spirit of truth and the mind of Christ.

We thank You for Your holy Word. Give us the earnest desire to grow in Your saving truth during our pilgrimage on this earth. Though we see our risen Lord only with the eyes of faith, teach us to love Him, and to rejoice in Him. Keep us in His love that we may at the last receive the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls, and take part in the restoration of all things and the refreshment that it will bring.

Bless Your Church, that it may speak out the Gospel of our risen Saviour faithfully, and with courage and zeal.

Watch over all institutions of learning, that they may produce young people who desire to follow You, serve You, and carry out Your good and gracious will.

Hear the prayers of all who need Your special help and favour. Assure them that You continue to be merciful. When, in Your deep wisdom, You permit any of us to suffer illness or other distress, comfort us, and assure us that You will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to bear. Strengthen us to endure hardship to Your glory and to our own spiritual blessing.

Strengthen the doubting and the faithless. Bring back the forgetful and the straying. Give us Your peace as we go out from here today. All this we pray in the name of Jesus, our risen Lord. Amen.

## SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5:29-42

<sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers has raised Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging Him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God has exalted Him to His right hand as Prince and Saviour, in order to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were infuriated and wanted to put them to death. <sup>34</sup> However, a certain man in the council, a Pharisee by the name of Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, who was respected by all the people, stood up, and ordered them to put the men outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> He told them, "Men of Israel, take care what you intend to do with these men! <sup>36</sup> For Theudas appeared some time ago, claiming to be somebody, and a

number of about four hundred men joined him. He was put to death, all who followed him were dispersed, and they came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and drew a host after him in a revolt. He also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. <sup>38</sup> In the present case I tell you, keep away from these men, and dismiss them! For, if this purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail; <sup>39</sup> but, if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. Perhaps you will even be found to be fighting against God."

<sup>40</sup> He persuaded them. Then they called the apostles in, flogged them, ordered them not to speak using the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> The apostles went away from the council, rejoicing that they had been thought worthy of being dishonoured for the sake of the Name. <sup>42</sup> Every day, in the temple, and from house to house, they

did not cease teaching and telling the Good News that Jesus is the Christ.

1 Peter 1:3-9

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has given us new birth by His great mercy, through raising Jesus Christ from the dead. Therefore we have a living hope, <sup>4</sup> which waits for an inheritance that cannot be destroyed or defiled and never fades away, and that God has reserved for you in heaven. <sup>5</sup> You are protected by God's power through faith, until you come to the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you greatly rejoice, even though now, for a little while, if it is necessary, you have been suffering grief in various trials. <sup>7</sup> These sufferings have come so that your faith may be proved genuine. It is more precious than gold, which perishes, although it is tested by fire. Then the tested genuineness of your faith will result in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup>

Although you have not seen Him, you love Him. You do not see Him now, but you believe in Him, and rejoice with unspeakable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup> because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31

<sup>19</sup> That Sunday evening the doors had been locked where the disciples were, because they were afraid of the Jews. Then Jesus came and stood among

them and said to them, "Peace be with you!"

<sup>20</sup> After He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. So the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I also am sending you."

<sup>22</sup> After He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit! <sup>23</sup> If you forgive any people's sins, they have been forgiven; if you retain any people's sins, they have been retained."

<sup>24</sup> However, Thomas, one of the twelve, who was called "The Twin," was not with them when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord."

He told them, "Unless I see the marks of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the marks of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I shall certainly not believe."

<sup>26</sup> A week later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors had been locked, Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you!"

<sup>27</sup> Next He told Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at My hands! Take your hand and put it into My side! Stop your unbelief, and believe!"

<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God!"



<sup>29</sup> Jesus asked him, “Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!”

<sup>30</sup> Jesus also performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which have not been written in this book. <sup>31</sup> However, these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in His name.