

“Praise God for Your Eternal Inheritance”

I Peter 1:3-9, Easter 2-A

April 27, 2014

“HERE, TAKE THIS AND PUT IT IN A SAFE PLACE! YOU MIGHT NEED IT SOMEDAY!” This is what my Dad said to me when he first handed me this rather strange looking gadget back in 1983, shortly after I signed the mortgage papers on my first home. If you had asked me then to tell you what it was, quite honestly, I didn’t have a clue!

My dad said, **“This is a water key. You can use it to ‘quickly’ turn off the entire water supply to your whole house, by going out to the front yard, removing that metal cover over the meter and using this tool to turn off that big valve very easily!”**

“When you think about all the places where water is being pumped into your house and mine, such places as **kitchen faucets, dishwashers, icemakers, washing machines, bathtubs, showers, bathroom sinks and toilets**, you really ought to have one of these on hand!”

FRIENDS, I BELIEVE THAT SO MANY OF THE GREAT TRUTHS THAT GOD LONGS TO TEACH US IN HIS WORD ARE LIKE THIS WATER KEY TOO! It’s not that we will always immediately make use of what God is teaching us, but someday these truths will end up serving us very well! And St. Peter’s words that he is writing to many different Christian congregations scattered **through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia** in our epistle lesson today are like that too. St. Peter knew that these Christians would soon be facing tough times of persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Actually, there were times when **CHRISTIANS HAD LITTLE TO FEAR FROM THE ROMAN GOVERNMENT.** In the book of ACTS, it is repeatedly the **Roman magistrates, the Roman soldiers and officials, who save Paul from the fury of the Jews and pagans alike.**

But a profound change came about during the reign of the **Roman Emperor Nero.** On **JULY 19, 64 AD, THE GREAT FIRE OF ROME BROKE OUT.** Rome, a city of narrow streets and high wooden buildings, was in real danger of being wiped out. The fire burned for three days and nights, was contained, and then broke out again.

THE CITIZENS OF ROME BELIEVED THAT NERO WAS RESPONSIBLE. He had a passion for building, and perhaps this was his justification. Many believe that he had deliberately taken steps to obliterate Rome, so that he might rebuild it.

But when the great resentment of the populace grew ever stronger over against **NERO BECAUSE OF SOMETHING HE HAD DONE, HE HAD TO COME UP WITH A SCAPEGOAT,** and the scapegoat he chose was the **newfound followers of The Way.** He blamed the whole thing on Christians and launched an assault against them!

ST. PETER KNEW THAT FOR THESE BELIEVERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH, FIERCE TIMES OF PERSECUTION WERE AHEAD! And so what is he inviting them to do here? Peter is inviting them to praise God for the eternal inheritance that was theirs and ours through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

IN ORDER TO TRY AND LIFT THEIR SPIRITS, Peter begins the letter by bursting forth into a spontaneous expression of heartfelt praise. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time! (vv.3-5)*

(1) These words of St. Peter are actually his own expression of praise to God for this “LIVING HOPE” that God has placed inside of us through the Gospel, as well as his apostolic exhortation for other Christians throughout the world to join him in praising God too!

I am so glad that **EASTER SUNDAY IS ONLY THE FIRST DAY OF THE EASTER SEASON that actually lasts for 50 days!** In praising God for the gift of his salvation, St. Peter is hoping to sweep the hearts and minds of these recipients upward, so that they might join him in praising God and worshipping him too!

Peter is encouraging us to offer up to the Triune God the kind of worship that we offered up to him here last Sunday, on Easter, on the queen of all church festivals which celebrates the resurrection of our Lord!

IT’S A DAY TO “PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS,” we say, **WITH RESPECT TO THE ORGAN**, as our organist surely did! It’s a day for **the choir to sing**, and for the **hand bells to play**, and for **Gospel processions and for scintillating music!** It’s a day for **Scripture reading, prayer, and the joyful celebration of the Holy Eucharist!** It’s a day for the placement of **Easter lilies** into the chancel and for singing exuberantly those magnificent Easter hymns!

IN THE WORDS OF OUR TEXT, ST. PETER IS SEEKING TO DO FOR THESE PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS IN LIVING IN THE FIRST CENTURY, THE VERY SAME THING THAT WE SEE OUR RISEN LORD doing for those troubled disciples in that Upper Room of Jerusalem that first Easter evening! Like Jesus, Peter wants to **REPLACE THE FEAR** in the hearts of these people **WITH PEACE**, and to **REPLACE THEIR DOUBTS WITH JOY!**

Peter says that we should praise and worship the Triune God because of the living hope he has placed within us! This was all God’s doing and not our own! “By his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

(2) Along with that gift of a living hope, God makes us certain of an eternal inheritance; a great inheritance with some very unique characteristics of its own, all far superior and totally different from any type of inheritance which human beings may bequeath to others in this world! Peter says it is “imperishable, undefiled and unfading.”

“IMPERISHABLE” means that it is not corruptible or subject to destruction. The local food bank, **Sharing God’s Love**, invites us to donate “non-perishable” food products; things that will keep on a shelf for a long time, without refrigeration: peanut butter, cereal, those boxes of macaroni and cheese, canned goods and the like. But even these items have a “shelf-life.”

“UNDEFILED” describes things that are unstained. When you were a child, your mother told you not to eat meals in your good dress clothes, if it was not necessary, so that you would not spill food on them and defile them.

“UNFADING” is actually used to describe a flower that will not wither or die. Peter is reminding us that we have an inheritance that can never lose its magnificence. None of the decaying elements of the world can affect the kingdom of heaven. In the last chapter of this letter Peter writes: *“And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory!”*

God’s Word assures us that we have been given a living hope! God’s Word has given us a second birth into the kingdom of God, whereby we are filled with a living **HOPE**. This is why Paul says to the Thessalonians, *“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep!”* (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)

God’s Word assures us that we are in possession of an eternal inheritance. But nowhere, does the Bible teach us that if we come to faith in Jesus Christ, and are filled with this **“LIVING HOPE”** and are made certain about our “eternal inheritance,” that we **WILL NEVER FACE ANY TRIALS OF ADVERSITIES OF ANY KIND**. Quite the contrary, Jesus told us that following him would often times bring us into odds with the world. Jesus is honest with us when he says, *“In this world you have much tribulation, but be of good courage, for I have overcome the world!”* (John 16:33)

Whenever the Bible speaks about people receiving the gift of God’s eternal salvation; that gift is accompanied by an unspeakable joy! The shepherd rejoices over the lost sheep. The woman rejoices over her lost coin. The father rejoices over the return of his prodigal son. **The joy of the believer who receives God’s salvation is not some brief, shallow, circumstantial emotion, but rather something permanent and profound!**

On the night before he died, our Lord said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy!”* (John 16:20) When Jesus arose from the dead and his disciples saw him, their sorrow turned to joy and his promise of life after death for believers became indeed believable to them! **But there are times for all of us when our faith will be tested** -- Peter compares that painful process to a piece of iron ore being place into a hot fire, so that the impurities may be burned away...and the gold will be saved! And yet, as precious as gold is---Peter is saying---if you heat it up high enough, it too will be destroyed.

Gold is perishable but the salvation that God brings to his people through the Gospel is imperishable.

SOME YEARS AGO, THERE WAS A YOUNG MAN WHO LIVED NOT FAR FROM HERE, ABOUT 30 MILES SOUTHWEST OF COLUMBIA. This young man was trying to establish a peach orchard on family land that he had inherited. He worked very hard and invested everything he had in that peach orchard. **Finally, to his great delight, the trees that he had planted on the land had eventually grown and matured to the point that they all blossomed! But wouldn’t you know it!?! Unfortunately, after they all blossomed, there was yet several days of**

very cold weather – so much so that a heavy frost come and killed this young man’s chances of having a good peach crop!

Though a believer and though he was a man who had gone to church every Sunday, all of his life, as far back as he could remember, after this happened, he didn’t go to church the following Sunday, nor the next, nor the next. His pastor went to visit him, to hopefully console him and also to invite him back to church services. This is when the young man exclaimed, **“I’m not coming back to church. Do you think I want to worship a God who cares so little for me that he would allow frost to kill all of my peaches!”**

The older pastor looked at this greatly discouraged and demoralized young man in silence, then said kindly, **“God loves you more than he does your peaches. God knows that while peaches do better without frost, it is impossible to grow the best men without frost. God is more interested in growing your faith than he is interested in growing peaches!”**

BUT THERE ARE STILL TIMES, AREN’T THERE, TIMES WHEN WE ALL HAVE OUR DOUBTS? One reason we are sympathetic to Thomas, or at least some of us are, I imagine, is because we all have our times of testing too! I imagine that Thomas wanted to believe that what his friends were telling him was true, but something inside of him just wouldn’t allow him to believe it. I believe there are at least two reasons why God has this story included for us in the Bible. (1) The first is to teach us that seeing Jesus with our physical eyes is in no way superior to seeing him with our spiritual eyes. Hearing the Word has just as much power to bring us to faith in Jesus Christ, as does the opportunity to see him alive in his resurrected body for ourselves. (2) Secondly, I believe there are always those people who tell us that if we ever have any doubts at all about our faith, that we can’t be a good Christian! But the story of Jesus’ encounter with Thomas is here to tell us that that simply isn’t true!

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Who is to say for sure! But because of God’s creative activity in this world, I’d say the chicken came first.

Which comes first, finding a community of Christians and hanging out with them, so that in their midst you might be given the faith that Thomas received? Or are you supposed to somehow come to faith on your own and then join the church?

MARTIN LUTHER once said, **“He who is to find Christ must first find the church for how can a man find Christ except for in those places where Christ has promised to make himself known!?! – BUT RATHER THAN SIMPLY ALLOWING GOD’S WORD TO HAVE ITS WAY WITH US, WE FALSELY IMAGINE THAT SAVING FAITH IS SOMETHING THAT WE HAVE TO MANUFACTURE FOR OURSELVES!**

So let me tell you one more story about a man who dared another man to eat a whole watermelon by himself. The second man said, **“I can do it!”** but I have to go somewhere first!

After he was gone for an hour the man returned. And indeed he ate that whole watermelon. **“That’s amazing,”** the man said, **“but where did you go after I set before you this awesome challenge?”** He said, **“I actually had two large watermelons on my back porch. I went home and ate them first, and then said to myself, ‘If I can eat two, I can certainly eat one more!’”**

Friends, the lengths and extent which we go to try and prove something to ourselves is sometimes unbelievable. But if I am hearing Jesus correctly in our Gospel lesson today in his words to Thomas, I need to hear these words for myself too: “Do not disbelieve, but believe!”

And how is that possible? Once again, salvation is God’s gift to us, borne of his mercy!

“Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book! But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name!” (John 20:30-31)

God’s Word assures us that we are going to receive an eternal inheritance! How can we be sure? Because God has given us a living hope! And look at that word “guarded” again in verse five: *“who by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time!”*

The word “guarded” is the same word that is used throughout the Bible to put garrisons in a city to protect it from enemies! So, “May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus until life everlasting!” (Philippians 4:7) Amen