

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Easter – April 4th, 2010

1 Peter 1:3-9

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. 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. 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, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Dear chosen people of God,

It is that time of the year. March madness is coming to conclusion as the final two college basketball teams out of a field of 65 plays for the national championship. At the time that I wrote this, my team, Duke, was still in the hunt. And I have to admit that I HOPE that they win it all. It is also time for the beginning of the long season of Major League baseball. And like every fan who is cheering for his favorite team, You HOPE that your team is playing in the World Series come October. We hope for many things. We HOPE that the weather remains nice throughout the Spring and Summer. We HOPE that our health remains good and we HOPE that everything thing fall into place in our lives.

But I hate to be the bearer of bad news, many of those hopes will not come true. Will the Brewers win the World Series? Most likely not! Will everything remain good in your lives? Most likely not. Will the weather remain nice all the time? Definitely not! But in the midst of this uncertainty, we have a HOPE that is 100% sure and certain. It is not a hope that comes and goes or is here one minute and gone the next. It is not a “I hope that something happens” type of hope. It is a hope that is living and active while we are on the s earth and for an eternity in heaven. Obviously as we gather on this Easter morning we recognize that this hope that I am talking about is the hope that we have in Jesus. It is this message of hope that will be our theme for this Easter morning as we use the theme:

Theme: We Have A Living Hope!

- 1. A Living Hope of forgiveness for sinners**
- 2. A Living Hope of an everlasting inheritance**
- 3. A Living Hope hidden under our crosses and trials**

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! And how can we *not* join in this marvelous hymn of praise with Peter who, on that first Easter Sunday, ran to the tomb and without hesitation, bolted into the tomb to amazingly see “the empty tomb” of our eternal salvation! This letter was written by Peter when he was older – most likely more than 30 years older than first Easter morning. Yet the freshness of the resurrection message transports the old preacher with all the vigor and optimism of a youth.

To whom does St. Peter address this epistle? He begins, **“To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout”** Asia Minor (1 Pe 1:1). They were Christians, most of whom were probably of Jewish ancestry. Many had moved from the persecutions of Jerusalem to various parts of the world. So they were twice displaced. They were Jews living in a foreign country, and they were Christians living as foreigners in a evil world. As such, Peter had many concerns with which to begin this letter. He could

begin by addressing their persecution at the hands of their new neighbors. Peter could begin with a caution not to be like seed sown on rocky ground that they should not fall prey to their trials and give up their faith in Jesus. Peter could have launched into any number of these relevant issues from the outset. Eventually, he touched on them all. But where does he begin? He begins with the doctrine which is the keystone of the Christian faith: the account of Jesus' resurrection. He begins with that joyful event on which the church stands or falls: that **“he was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification”** (Ro 4:25). He does this to raise their sights from earth to heaven. He first spreads before them the long view that Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee that all who put their trust in him will rise to everlasting life on the Last Day.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” What does it mean to praise God except to recount the wonderful blessings that are ours—especially on this joyful Easter morning? The Apostle Peter piles on the descriptive words to show us what is ours through the resurrection of our Savior from the dead! **“ . . . new birth . . . living hope . . . an inheritance that can never perish . . . kept in heaven for you . . . shielded by God's power . . . revealed in the last time . . .”** so that you can rejoice in **“all kinds of trials”** because they **“refine your faith, which is of greater worth than gold.”** A sermon could be written on each phrase. But as we turn the gemstone of our Lord's resurrection, the facets of its sweeping changes are stunning. Everything that we lost in the fall into sin is restored by the resurrection of Christ from the dead! Let us rejoice in as many as we can in the time we have.

And who better to praise the mercy and power of Jesus who died and rose than St. Peter? He was such a firsthand recipient of Jesus' love and mercy. He who, in the courtyard of Caiaphas, brought down terrible curses on himself, denying he knew Jesus and, later, weeping bitterly, spending three days in the horrible despair. During what must have been the longest weekend of his life, Peter had time to think about the words of Jesus in whom he had placed his confidence. Finally, when Jesus walked into the locked room and proved he had broken death's stronghold, all that Peter was thinking about came into focus. The Lord had risen, just as he had told them! And if we have been tracing the agonies and the loud cries of our Savior during the Lenten season, we understand all too well that we, together with Peter, are the recipients of such rich grace! We love much because Jesus' resurrection has declared that we have been forgiven much.

“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.” New birth! Under the cover of night, that is what our dear Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that we need. Because we are **“flesh born of flesh,”** we have a gruesome, eternal birth defect. Like fallen Adam, we have no true fear of God, no true faith in God, and can only desire what God hates. Though we may have entered this world with a 9.9 Apgar score, all of us were spiritually born dead. By nature we embraced a self-imposed exile from the saving presence of God. We were lost forever. The only hope was if the holy and just God reached down in his great mercy and intervened. Today again we discover that he did just that.

“He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” In his great mercy, God the Father had pity on us and all people. In his wisdom, he reversed the process of our damnation by using a virgin, a tree, and death. He sent his Son to be conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. By that holy birth, God became our brother-in-the-flesh. And because he was born without sin, he was worthy to be the Lamb of God, who took away the sin of the world.

Just as sin came into this world by the tree in the middle of the garden, Jesus was sacrificed on a tree between two criminals. The new tree of life for this lost world was the cross on which Jesus was hung. In that way he paid the full price for our rebellion and opened the gates of heaven for us.

Just as we were overcome by death, so he allowed himself to be overcome by death. What did our Lord demand for all of our sins? Death! And by Jesus' death you and I have been set free from sin, death, and eternal hell. Because death could not hold Jesus, we are assured that our sins are forgiven, God's justice has been satisfied, and Christ's resurrection guarantees our resurrection to everlasting life.

“In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of

Jesus Christ from the dead.” This wonderful gospel message of Jesus’ resurrection is part of the gospel message that the Holy Spirit uses to create the faith God requires in our hearts. **“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit”** (Jn 3:5), Jesus told Nicodemus. Since God’s Word gives power to the water, Baptism conveys to us all the blessings of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In fact, it makes us partakers and happy recipients of his work on Calvary and at the open tomb: **“We were buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life”** (Ro 6:4).

2. The living hope of an everlasting inheritance

Beyond the fact that we have hope in the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross and which was completed as Jesus rose on the third day. There is so much more hope that we have. Listen to what Peter says, **“He has given us new birth into a living hope . . . and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade . . .”** What is our inheritance like? The first thing we tend to think of is heaven. Since Jesus’ glorious resurrection is the guarantee that our sins are forgiven, there is nothing to keep us out of heaven.

Heaven is described in many ways in the Bible. It is described as a beautiful garden, a jewel covered city, a wedding banquet, to name just a few. Each of these descriptions touches aspects of life that we hold dear on earth: beauty, riches, fine hospitality, the high joy of our wedding day, the warmth of being surrounded by loving family and good friends. However, since all of these are mere metaphors of heaven and none of these are heaven itself, they do not completely satisfy our curiosity. Somehow we sense more. And we are right. In fact, our inheritance is greater than we can ask for or imagine. But that is always the way it must be when we try to grasp things that are beyond our realm of experience.

St. Paul once said that God had given him a brief experience of heaven (2 Co 12:1-4). He said that he heard things in heaven that the human voice is not capable of reproducing. If the mere sounds of heaven are beyond our earthly reproduction, how much less can we describe what heaven will truly be like? the inexpressible joy? the complete health of body and mind? the complete harmony with those around us? the thrill of knowing that there is one who fulfills our every need — our dear, resurrected, and living Savior? Yes, Jesus’ resurrection gives us all this.

But Peter continues, **“ . . . an inheritance that can never *perish, spoil or fade* . . .”** Large earthly inheritances can be squandered, stolen, or lose their luster. Our Lord’s resurrection gives us an estate that **“moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal”** (Mt 6:20). What is more, the almighty and merciful Lord himself stands watch over it so that no con artist—be he man or fallen angel—can rob us of it. That’s why Peter assures us it is **“*kept in heaven for you.*”**

But there is more. The resurrection inheritance is ours long before we enter heaven. We hold the deed for heaven—today—by faith in Christ. As coheirs with Christ, we rejoice in our new status before God now—long before we realize all of the benefits. Notice how Peter speaks of our inheritance as something we continue to have ever since we came to faith: **“Through faith [you] are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice.”**

Since Jesus’ death and resurrection has given us this new status before God, how should we live? As commoners who have no inheritance? Shall we squander our days as those who have no hope, no life, no future? Not at all! We put off the distractions of this life and embrace our high calling with pure actions, holy words, and good thoughts. In these ways we give witness to the world that our Lord’s resurrection is broad enough, deep enough, and high enough to include them as well!

3. A living hope hidden under our crosses and trials

But living in this world sometimes makes it so hard to see the great and wonderful hope that Peter is describing for us today. This is the part of the sermon for today which gives us specific help to deal with the many problems and worries that we will face as we wait for the day we receive the full joy of being in heaven.

Peter starts with these words, **“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.”** This glorious inheritance is hidden from the eyes of many because of the severe trials Christians must suffer. Since the world only counts wealth in those things that are seen, they cannot fathom why the resurrection of Jesus moves us to rejoice even in our afflictions.

Yet we are very aware that the sinful flesh inside of us will not stop until it can destroy our Spirit-given faith. In this way, it would rob us of our glorious inheritance. When afflictions strike, they take from us all the earthly things that most people look to as evidence that God loves them. Wealth is taken. Friends desert us. Health gives way to disease and old age. Finally, we are left with nothing but the Word and promise of the almighty God, which points us to the cross and empty tomb. There and there alone we find the everlasting arms of the Father, holding us up when all else fails us. That is why Christians can bless their crosses and afflictions. They say to their afflictions, “You meant to harm me, but you do me more good than you know. For you make me despair of earth and lift my eyes to heaven. You drive me to my Bible and to Christ. Nowhere else can I find irrefutable proof that God loves me!”

In that way, trials are like a refiner’s furnace that burns away the dirt and base metals from gold. Our faith, like gold, is in no way diminished by a refiner’s fire. Rather, the fire of affliction brings our faith to its purest and strongest form.

What a feast St. Peter spreads before us on this Easter morning! And with the great confidence of one who has tasted and seen the wealth of heavenly glory through the eyes of faith, he sums this up for us with the final words of our text: **“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, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”** Heaven is yours. Death has been defeated. We don’t have to say, “I hope I go to heaven when I die.” Instead we can say with the same confidence as Peter who witnessed that first Easter morning that we know 100% that we have a living hope that is ours through God’s grace and mercy. Amen.