



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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The Future Starts Now

1 Peter 1:3-9

A sermon by William M. Klein

Virtual Worship via ZOOM

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Before I read our lesson, I want to provide something of an historical context. The letter of 1 Peter was probably written around the year 67 AD to help fledgling Christians who were going through a very difficult ordeal. The difficult times they faced were not what we are facing today or the sort of difficulties which you and I are accustomed. In their day, the price many of them paid for being Christian was a dreadful death.¹

1 Peter was written to Christians scattered across the NE corner of Asia Minor encouraging them to be strong and to endure in their faith.² By enduring with courage and faith whatever trial they may face, they would honor Christ and bring glory to God.

With that as the historical background, listen to the lesson for today...

3 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, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 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. 8 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, 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1:3-9 NRSV)

1

What did Jesus accomplish for us by his life, death, and resurrection? It is one of the largest questions Easter forces us to consider.

But you know something...it is probably not the question the earliest disciples asked as they huddled in fear from Good Friday through sunrise Easter morning. My guess is they simply wondered what had gone wrong. Why had Jesus, their friend, suffered such a cruel death? What could they have done different? And what were they supposed to do next?

Easter changed all that, though. As they tried to make sense of their friend raised from the dead they forgot all about the worries that had occupied their minds for three days. What did Jesus' resurrection mean? What did it mean for them? What did it mean for Israel? What did it mean for all of creation?

Easter turned every earthly question on its head. What seemed of great concern before didn't any longer. The darkness of evil and death were no match for the goodness and light of God made visible, made real, in this world through his risen Son.

I completely understand why the church eventually redefined the marking of time based upon the life-span of Jesus. Because of the resurrection, there really was a sense in

which the world could be divided into time prior to Jesus and time that followed Jesus. The resurrection was and is an event that large – that world changing.

It would be silly, though, to suppose the earliest disciples jumped straight from amazement and exceeding joy to pondering what Jesus accomplished for them. A systematic explanation evolved over the course of years, generations, millennia.

By the time 1 Peter was written, at least 30 years had elapsed...30 years of the church gathering for worship...30 years of the church thinking about, praying about, suffering for, struggling with, and witnessing to the resurrection.

To the question – “what did Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection accomplish,” the author of 1 Peter wrote, “By his great mercy (God) has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading...”

When 1 Peter was written Romans were putting Christians to death. The darkness of evil and suffering seemed to be as real as ever. It surely didn’t look like the sting of death had been defeated.

In the face of fierce persecution, the faithful were told there was more to life than what they could see and experience. And this they believed with all their heart and strength...because of the power of God’s Spirit working within them.

Those people in power who set blood-thirsty dogs on Christian men, women, and children thought suffering and death were the worst life had to offer. They thought there was nothing worse that could be done – and, to be sure, what was done to those poor folks was unspeakably awful. What those people in power didn’t know, though, was that because of Jesus’ resurrection, the faithful were given new birth into a living hope...a hope not even hatred, torture, and death could erase. What the persecutors didn’t know was that the followers of Jesus possessed an inheritance given them by God – and to that inheritance they clung with all their might.

Would you have the same sort of courage and hope and assurance in the face of angry dogs and the threat of being burned alive? Do we have the same sort of courage and hope and assurance in the face of the coronavirus?

2

Consider with me what having faith in Christ Jesus gives us – and what faith in Christ Jesus costs us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian martyred by Adolf Hitler, said the cost of faith was one’s life – that Christ bids us come and die.³ Writes Bonhoeffer:

The grace God is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives, and it is grace because it gives people the only true life.⁴

For us, too often there is no cost. Can you think of a way in which living out your faith is even an inconvenience? The fact is that for many card-carrying Christians if faith in Jesus requires much, then “forget it.” Adult Christians of this tepid form of discipleship wonder why so many young people can find no reason to care about church or Christianity!

Poet Ann Weems thinks the good news of Easter was meant for more than this. It was meant to “call brittle bones to leaping and stone hearts to soaring.”⁵ The cross and resurrection were meant to give us the courage and confidence to set caution aside – to dive in – to care deeply when budgets and policies make life more difficult for the old, the poor, the children, the immigrant, those who are impaired mentally and emotionally, those who have no voice...the very people Jesus spent his time with.

The Easter message was meant to fill us with joy and zeal and laughter. It was meant to give us the gumption to say “no” to evil and “yes” to goodness. It was meant to give us perspective – the kind of perspective that frees us to live as people who know the end of life’s story before the end actually arrives – the kind of perspective that lets us with gusto sing with Martin Luther, “let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still, his kingdom is forever.”⁶

Yes, Easter gives us the kind of perspective that lets us know God has given us an inheritance – and that inheritance means no matter what happens to us as we join God at work in the world, nothing can ever separate us from God’s love.⁷ Nothing can keep Christ from taking us to himself.⁸ It is because of this glorious inheritance we do not fear when trouble comes – when the earth seems to change – when it seems the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.⁹

Easter was meant to give us new birth into a living hope. That hope says trust God more than we trust ourselves. It says give glad thanks that we can trust God is hanging on to us by the hair of the head where we cannot see or reach.¹⁰ Along with those earliest Christians and people of faith through time, we cling to this inheritance with all our might...because our lives depend upon it.

3

Let me share with you an interesting analogy in this regard. It comes from John Mortimer, an English lawyer who became a playwright-novelist and created the “Rumpole” series for the BBC. Mortimer once asked a gray-bearded yachtsman if sailing on the English Channel was not a dangerous sport. “Not dangerous at all,” said the man, “provided you don’t learn to swim.” Mortimer asked what he could mean by that. It seemed to him the ability to swim would be a good and prudent thing. The old sailor replied, “When you’re in a spot of trouble, if you can swim, you try to strike out for the shore. You invariably drown. As I can’t swim I cling to the wreckage and they send a helicopter out for me. That’s my tip, if you ever find yourself in trouble, cling to the wreckage.”¹¹

This may seem like good advice but an odd analogy – yet, if we are wise, isn’t the inheritance we are given by God something to cling to with all our might in good times and bad? I do not mean to say the inheritance is in some sense “wreckage” – which is why Mortimer’s story is not a perfect analogy.

But it seems to me the point remains. All the plans we are in the business of making are continually being upset by both disaster and delight. Why can’t we see that the life Christ wants for us is not about our ability to be in control – to make life easy or comfortable or certain or safe. It is not about getting to the top or staying on the bottom. It is about clinging to God with all our might.

At the top of Christ's wish list was for us to love God and to fiercely love and care for one another. We cannot do this unless we cling to God. But...out of fear, out of greed, out of boredom, we lash ourselves to things that will not sustain us...what we might call fool's gold. And each lash is like one of the thick hairs that knit Gulliver to the ground; their sum total keeps us solidly tied down.¹²

When we cling to the wrong things – when we think we can live without God – we invariably drown.

Writer Ann Lamott suggests that “maybe (God's) grace is the unseen sounds that make (us) look up.”¹³ Maybe she is right.

Trusting that our hope is in God alone and living with this awareness may make us more attentive to those unseen sounds Lamott was talking about. It may give us an ear for God. Clinging to Christ may give us the kind of hearts able to love God, our neighbor, ourselves, and creation.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy what God accomplished for us was new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of his Son from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

To this good news may we cling with all our might. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Latourette, Kenneth S. 1976. A History of Christianity, 85. Citing the Annals of Tacitus written 50 years after the events which took place after Rome began burning on July 19, 64 AD. For their faith, according to the writings of Tacitus, many Christians were torn to pieces by dogs or fastened to crosses and set ablaze.

² According to 1 Peter 5:12, the author of 1 Peter was Silvanus who was most likely Silas spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's traveling companion. Since Peter was a common fisherman, it makes sense to suppose Peter dictated and Silvanus did the actual writing – which would explain the highly developed style and language of the letter. So, the thoughts belong to Peter, the style belongs to Silvanus.

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1975. The Cost of Discipleship (Revised and Unabridged edition). NY: Macmillan Pub. Co. Inc., 99. He was put to death at Flosserbürg concentration camp April 9, 1945.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, 47.

⁵ Weems, Ann. 1992. Kneeling in Jerusalem. Louisville: WJK Press, 93. *Easter Morning*.

⁶ The hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, vs. 4.

⁷ Romans 8:38-39.

⁸ John 14:3.

⁹ Psalm 46.

¹⁰ Howell, James. 2004. “What I want for Christmas, in *Christian Century*. December 14 issue. Chicago: Christian Century Foundation, 9.

¹¹ Sweet, Leonard I. 1995. Strong in the Broken Places: A Theological Reverie on the Ministry of George Everett Ross. Akron, OH: Univ. of Akron Press, 1. Citing *Clinging to the Wreckage: A Part of Life*, 1.

¹² Sweet, 179. Citing Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*, 19 & 124.

¹³ Lamott, Anne. 2005. Plan B: further thoughts on faith. NY: Riverhead Books, 162.