

Sermon for April 22, 2017 – Easter 2

1 Peter 1:3-9 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme Rejoice in your living hope!

- 1) It is an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.
- 2) It is proved genuine through the fires of life.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴into an inheritance that is undying, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. ⁵Through faith you are being protected by God's power for the salvation that is ready to be revealed at the end of time. ⁶Because of this you rejoice very much, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various kinds of trials ⁷so that the proven character of your faith—which is more valuable than gold, which passes away even though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, yet by believing in him, you are filled with a joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Last week we celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the joy it offers Christians. But a cynic might say, "Jesus rose from the grave? Good for him! How does this fact help me now with all the problems I face? What relevancy does it have for me now?"

My answer? Jesus' resurrection impacts my life more than any other event. It gives me purpose, meaning and – most importantly – hope. God wants Jesus' resurrection to do the same for you too. Let us consider this truth, under the theme: **Rejoice in your living hope!** *1) It's an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. 2) Your hope is proved genuine through the fires of life.*

Part One: It is an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

Jesus once warned his disciples: "*In this world you will have trouble.*"ⁱ Isn't that the truth! Financial problems, health issues, broken relationships, the loss of loved ones – the list can go on and on as to what kind of troubles we face in life. And those are just the physical troubles! Add to that the spiritual temptations to sin, doubt and despair that constantly plague our souls as Christians. Yes, Jesus is right: in this world we have trouble. So, where do we find help and relief? In Jesus, as he himself says: "*But take heart! I have overcome the world.*"ⁱⁱ

In our sermon text for today, Peter calls us to rejoice with him because of the great hope we have in Christ. He writes: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴into an inheritance that is undying, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*

Looking back at all the mistakes you've made in life (sins you've committed and people you've hurt), have you ever wished you could have a do over – starting fresh with a clean slate? Well, St. Peter's says that God, in his great mercy, has given us a *new birth* through Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Through faith in Christ we have a new start. How so? Because all our sins died with Jesus on the cross, when he suffered the just punishment they all had earned. And because our sins all died with Jesus, his resurrection from the dead signals that we have a clean slate before God. The Holy Spirit connects us with this forgiveness through Baptism – giving us a new birth into a new life, as St. Paul writes: *We were therefore buried with him 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. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*ⁱⁱⁱ Because Christ's work has wiped our slate of sins clean, we no longer need to fear God's wrath. Through faith we are made new. We have a *living hope*.

But what exactly is our hope, and why is it called living? Simply put: our hope is that God forgives our sins for Christ's sake. We are reconciled to God. Through faith in him, eternal life with Jesus in paradise is our future – free from all sin, sorrow, pain and death. And why is this hope called living? Because our Savior, upon whom our hope is centered, is risen from the dead and sits at the right hand of God the Father, from where He rules over all things for the benefit of his Church.

To repeat, our living hope is the inheritance of an *undying, undefiled, and unfading* life at peace with God in paradise. Just think of what that means? God has given believers a future in which death will not touch them, sin will not defile them and sorrow not depress them. Every day will be new and perfect, with no regret. Each day will be as joyous and awe inspiring as our first.

And note: this Christian hope is not described as a wage that must be earned. No, it is an inheritance – a gift freely given to us by God without our work and effort. And why does God call it an inheritance? Because this hope of heaven is not something we could have ever earned on our own. God demands perfection and can not tolerate the slightest sin in his presence. We, however, are far from perfect. Truth be told, sin corrupts our entire nature – from our outward actions all the way down to the very inclinations of the thoughts of our hearts.^{iv} God's holy law declares us sinful – deserving of nothing but his eternal wrath and punishment in hell.

But God doesn't want us lost in the hopelessness of hell. For some reason, which goes beyond anything we can understand, God loves us so much that He sent his Son to save us from our sins and give us this wonderful hope of eternal life. Not only that, but He also sent the Holy Spirit to awaken faith in our hearts through the preaching of his Gospel so that we might receive this hope as our very own – thereby giving our life new meaning and purpose.

Even though we might not see our inheritance right now, we know that it exists. How so? Think of it like a trust fund that parents might set up for their children. The money is in the bank and it belongs to the children. They just have to wait until the day set by their parents comes to pass and then they will receive that money. In a similar way God has already purchased our inheritance of eternal life and signed our names to it. It is ours, protected and waiting for us in heaven until the day set by God the Father for our reception of it comes to pass.

Rejoice, therefore, in your living hope: It is an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. It is a hope that is proved genuine through the fires of life.

Part Two: It is proved genuine through the fires of life.

Now a cynic might say: “Your talk about an eternal inheritance waiting for us in heaven is all fine and dandy, but look at my life and all the problems I face. Where do I find hope to deal with these problems now?”

The living hope of our eternal inheritance with Christ is exactly the hope we need for getting through the fires of life, as St. Peter says: *“Because of this you rejoice very much, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various kinds of trials . . .*

Did you catch that? Peter is basically saying that our living hope gives us joy even when we face the worst trials and griefs of this life. How so? Because we know that no evil we experience in this life will compare with the eternal glory and peace we will have with God in heaven. This life truly is “a little while” compared to the eternity that awaits us.

Peter goes on to say that the LORD allows all the trials and griefs you face in life *“so that the proven character of your faith—which is more valuable than gold, which passes away even though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

A piece of unrefined gold ore doesn’t look like much. One would wonder why anyone would consider it valuable. Only after it has been refined through the intense heat of fire does the luster of gold show.

Just as God created gold inside of ore, so he has also created something very valuable inside of us through the Gospel. That something is our faith in Christ. But our sinful nature – with all its superstitions, selfishness, doubts and sins - tarnish this faith and hinder it from shining brightly. This is why God refines us through the fires of life: the flames of financial problems, the heat of sickness, the intensity of evil being done to us, etc. . . so that our faith might shine ever more brightly and attract others to Christ.

And how do the fires of life accomplish this? By driving us to cling all the more firmly to Christ and the eternal salvation he won for us through his cross. We show that our hope is not in this life, but in the LORD and all he has promised.

I think one of the best examples of this can be seen in the account of a Christian slave girl named Blandina, who lived when Christians were severely persecuted in the Roman empire. The Church historian Eusebius states that, because she refused to renounce her faith in Christ, she was imprisoned, exposed, beaten, scourged, tied to a cross for a time, fastened up in a net and was tossed repeatedly by a furious bull. On top of this, she literally faced the refiner's fire for her faith – being shackled to a hot iron chair that seared her flesh – and yet, in the midst of these refining fires, her faith glowed ever so brilliantly, as she clung to Christ and asked her persecutors why

they were doing these things to her. Finally, since all their torture failed, her persecutors killed her by slitting her throat; but not before her glorious confession made a lasting impression. How so? Eusebius tells us that many who came to mock and jeer at the Christians during this sick show of persecution, were so impressed by her confession and greatly ashamed by her death that all persecutions in that area ceased. Not only that, but many who experienced her suffering repented of their sins and became Christian themselves.

Blandina was just a humble slave girl of no importance to the world, but oh how precious she is to God. How beautifully she will shine on the Last Day, when she accompanies Christ together with all the saints to judge the living and the dead. Though she had not seen Jesus during the fires of her life, she loved and believed in him. She was filled with inexpressible and glorious joy, and received the goal of her faith: the salvation of her soul.

Our hope is a living hope that the fires of this life cannot kill. If anything, the fires of life prove our hope genuine. How so? By causing us to throw off all self-reliance and pride and forcing us to cling to Christ's promises in faith.

You might be thinking to yourself, "Would I have been so bold in Blandina's sandals?" The fires in your life answer that question for you: revealing to you the genuineness of your faith. Yes, this life is tough, but we have a living hope: Jesus Christ, our risen and ascended Savior, who has prepared an imperishable, eternal inheritance for us.

Cynics can say what they want, but our living hope in Jesus has supreme relevance for life now as it comforts and strengthens us for every trial life throws our way. And, as we cling to this hope, St. Peter's words come true for us: ⁸*Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, yet by believing in him, you are filled with a joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,* ⁹*because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* Rejoice in your living hope. Amen.

ⁱ John 16:33a NIV84

ⁱⁱ John 16:33b NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 6:4,5 NIV84

^{iv} Cf, Genesis 6:5 & 8:1