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Easter 2

1 Peter 1:3-9

WHAT MAKES A LIVING HOPE A LIVING HOPE?

In Bible times, gold was purified by melting it at a temperature of 1900° F. The garbagey impurities, called the dross, would rise to the top and then be skimmed off. Once it cooled, what you were left with was the pure product. The arrival of coronavirus may be having a similar effect on our faith in Jesus. As our lives are fired within the furnace of a pandemic, think of all the things, the big things, being skimmed off from the top, so to speak. First would be the sense of security as regards our health, then sports of every kind from little league to professional, then the whole vast entertainment industry, then food with the closing of restaurants and festivals and stores with empty shelves, then work and money with the shutdown of our economy, then freedom to come and go, then the companionship and camaraderie of each other.

That is not to say these things are impure in themselves. But God has stripped them away from us to purify our faith in Jesus. You might think that suffering so much loss or uncertainty would only kill our confidence in God's goodness or cause us to doubt Jesus' intentions toward us. But the miraculous thing is that just the opposite happens. Our faith in Jesus becomes stronger than ever for our hope in Jesus is a living hope not a dying hope. Peter wrote: *For a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various kinds of trials 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.* Your faith is more precious than gold because through faith in Jesus you are saved. This faith, this trust in Jesus, that survives dark days and grim circumstances—more than that, it thrives and shines more brightly than ever during such times—Peter refers to as a living hope. From 1 Peter chapter 1 today, let's ponder what makes a living hope a living hope.

First, you have a living hope because the Lord of Life gave birth to that hope in you. Peter wrote: *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.* A new birth into a living hope. Here's a question for you: What did you do to become born physically? What did you personally contribute to making your birthday happen? Nothing right? Life is a gift. So is spiritual life—meaning your faith in Jesus. A living hope is not something you conjured up in yourself. It wasn't your idea, your choice, your decision, your personal energy. No, God gave birth to your faith in Jesus by the power of His Word when you were baptized. The Bible says you and I were naturally spiritually dead and therefore any idea, resolution or intention you and I could come up with on our own would still always ultimately result in a casket, a headstone, a group of mourners. The Bible says, *The world and its desires pass away.* But what makes a living hope a living hope is that it does not come to an end because it is the living God who put that hope in you.

Secondly, what makes a living hope a living hope is that it is grounded in the resurrection of our living Savior. Again, 1 Peter 1 tells us, *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.* Ours is not a faith based on the theories of some dead philosopher. Our hope is tied to a living person, Jesus, who actually, physically came back to life after He had died. Jesus made us this promise: *Because I live, you also will live.* Jesus and Jesus alone can deliver on such a promise. He gives us a living hope.

One of the things we Christians in affluent America suffer from is what we might call the "Jesus-and" syndrome. Jesus and my college degree. Jesus and my kids traveling team. Jesus and the latest movie. Jesus and my new patio project. Jesus and my volunteering. Jesus and my retirement. Instead of Jesus being the main thing that animates us day after day, the main desire of our hearts, He becomes more of just an add-on to our

already busy, diversion-laden lives. That's because our sinful hearts easily latch on to idols of all kinds. Would we do any better than the rich, young ruler who walked away sadly when Jesus told him, "Sell everything you have. Give it away and come follow me"? He understood that His "Jesus-and" heart excluded him from the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, let's repent of our "Jesus-and" syndrome. Why else do you think God has sent us the coronavirus? But, let us also find our release from guilt in the resurrection of Jesus. Had Jesus stayed dead, there would be no way for us to know that Jesus' death on the cross had successfully atoned for all our guilt. But the fact that Jesus came out of the grave resurrects our hope, our confidence, that we are forgiven and we are in good standing with God once again. It is a living hope, an ongoing hope, in the living God grounded in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The third thing we see in 1 Peter 1 that makes a living hope a living hope is that it anticipates something never-endingly real. Listen again to 1 Peter: *God gave us a new birth into a living hope...into an inheritance that is undying, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you. Undying, undefiled, unfading.* Another way to say that is that the inheritance Jesus earned for us from God is untouched by death, unstained by evil and unimpaired by time. Perhaps you are familiar with the story, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." The boy, Charlie, leaves his drab, pauper life to inherit an empire of untold wealth and beauty from chocolate manufacturer, Willie Wonka. In a similar way, this life will seem but a poor, faint shadow compared to the brilliant, permanent reality of heaven. That makes for a living hope!

The fourth thing Peter mentions to make our living hope a living hope is that God does not let it die. The power of God guards and preserves us in that hope. Peter wrote, *Through faith you are being protected by God's power for the salvation that is ready to be revealed at the end of time.* As you hear His Word, whenever you receive His Sacrament, the Holy Spirit is at work to guard and keep you in the faith. How else would you and I be able to keep believing in Jesus in so much adversity if it weren't for the Holy Spirit working in us? When we stand before His throne on that Last Day, we'll say, "It is only to your credit, Lord, that I am here and did not fall away from you."

Finally, let's note that what makes a living hope a living hope is our love for Jesus and the joy we have in Him. Peter wrote: *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, because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* This is not joy in the sense of being happy. But a love and a joy, let's call it a perspective, that as long as we have Jesus, we know all will be well.

I am reminded of 101 year old Olga Becker. Olga was a member of Peace, called to heaven many years ago. I visited her at the hospital the day before she died. Olga had always had a sharp mind. As often happens to someone shortly before death, Olga became confused and frustrated at what was happening around her. As I approached her hospital room I overheard Olga, this sweet, petite centenarian, vigorously arguing with the hospital personnel: "Why are you keeping me here? You can't hold me like an animal. I'm not a dog that you can keep locked in a cage." As I came along side her she turned her head and demanded: "And who are you?" This dear lady who had always known my children's names and ages, but now she didn't recognize me. I replied, "I'm Pastor Werre and I'm here to talk to you about Jesus." She paused for second. Then she said, "Well Him I know I can trust. But I don't know about you!"

Those words were pure music to this pastor. It was breathtakingly miraculous, something only the Holy Spirit could do. This is the love and joy Peter writes about. In all her confusion, in the fog of her final hours, Olga still knew Jesus, still loved Jesus, still trusted Him. She had a living hope in Him.

This living hope in Jesus is worth more than gold. Let us therefore not resent God for sending us hardship. Let us thank Him for it. For by it He purifies our living hope in Christ. May He grant us all a living hope like Olga's.