

Easter Sunday – April 4, 2010  
1 Peter 1:3-9 WE HAVE A LIVING HOPE!  
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Brothers and sisters in Christ,

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, grand doxology—this hymn of praise—with Peter who, on that first Easter Sunday, breathlessly caught up to young John at the entrance of the empty tomb and without hesitation, bolted past his young friend to examine “Exhibit A” of our eternal salvation!

This letter was written by the elder disciple, Peter, more than 30 years after that first Easter morning. But you can almost see the sparkle in his eye as he ponders the events of that day and as he feels surging up in his heart all the emotions that the message of the resurrection calls forth.

To whom does St. Peter address this epistle? He begins, **“To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout”** Asia Minor. 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 pilgrims in a hostile society. As such, Peter had many pressing concerns with which he could have begun this letter. He could begin by addressing their persecution at the hands of their new neighbors. He could comfort them since they were suspected of being disloyal to the government under which they lived. Peter could begin with a caution not to succumb to their trials and give up their faith in Jesus. Peter could have launched into any number of these relevant issues and eventually, he did touch on all of them.

But where does he *begin*? With the doctrine which is the keystone of the Christian faith: the account of Jesus’ resurrection. He begins with that happy event on which the church stands or falls: that **“Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification.”** 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 review the wonderful blessings that are ours—especially on this glorious Festival of the Resurrection?

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 of those phrases. But as we gaze at this gemstone of our Lord’s resurrection, the facets of its intense beauty are stunning. Everything that we lost through the fall into sin is restored by the resurrection of Christ from the dead! First of all, because of Christ’s resurrection we have **the living hope of forgiveness for sinners.**

And who better to extol the Savior’s forgiveness than St. Peter? Rich treasures are sure to flow from the pen of one who loved much because he was forgiven much! Remember how Peter, in the courtyard of the high priest, brought down terrible oaths on himself, denying he knew Jesus and then, after hearing the rooster crow, went out and wept bitterly. During what must have been the longest weekend of his life, Peter had time to ponder the warnings of his

master. Finally, when Jesus walked into the locked room and proved he had broken death's iron shackles, all that Peter was pondering came into focus. The Lord had risen, just as he had told them!

And if you have been with us during the Lenten season recalling our Savior's death on the cross, you 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! 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 alive and screaming in the arms of our mother, the Bible says that all of us were spiritually stillborn. 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 we discover that he did just that.

One fourth-century preacher pointed out that this condition of sin came upon us through three things: a virgin (who listened to the serpent), a tree (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), and a death (our first parents' separation from God—nine centuries before Adam physically died).

But the Father is to be praised for doing something to save the human race through the very same instruments that brought us down: **“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 our fallen race. 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 we were overcome by the tree in the middle of the garden, Jesus was sacrificed between two criminals. The new tree of life was the cross in the center of the fallen human race. 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. But by that death God's justice has been satisfied, sin has been paid for, punishment removed. Christ's resurrection guarantees all that, including 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.”**

And this wonderful gospel message of Jesus' resurrection is the tool that the Holy Spirit uses to create the faith God requires in our hearts.

For many of us the wonderful gospel first touched our hearts in the waters of baptism. Jesus told Nicodemus, **I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.** 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 passive partakers and happy recipients of his work on Calvary and at the open tomb. Paul told the Romans, **“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.**

## II.

We also have **the living hope of a secure and everlasting 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 jeweled city, a wedding banquet, and a family reunion, to name just a few. Each of these descriptions touches aspects of life that we hold dear on earth: beauty, riches, hospitality, the joy of our wedding day, the warmth of being surrounded by loving family and good friends. However, since all of these are mere pictures 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 anything 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. 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 the surpassingly great visions? 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—even 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”**. 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 right now, even before we realize all of the benefits. Notice how Peter speaks of our inheritance as something we continue to have from the moment 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' cross 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 chaste 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!

### III.

We even have **a living hope hidden under the cross and trials:**

**“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 how we can rejoice even in our afflictions. The resurrection of Jesus from the grave is the key.

Oh, we are keenly aware that the sinful flesh inside of us will not stop until it can destroy our Spirit-given faith. It wants to rob us of our glorious inheritance. When afflictions strike, they take from us all the earthly props 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. In the end

they make us despair of this life and this earth, and instead lift our eyes to heaven, to our Bibles and to Christ. Nowhere else can we find irrefutable proof that God loves us!”

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. Rather, the fire of affliction brings our faith to its purest and strongest form.

What a feast St. Peter spreads before us on this Festival of the Resurrection! And with the irrepressible confidence of one who has tasted and seen the wealth of heavenly glory through the eyes of faith, he sweeps us up with the final words of the grand doxology: **“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.”** That’s what the Christian faith is all about – proclaiming our Savior’s cross and empty tomb, so that we have the priceless gift of salvation. Amen.