

April 19, 2020

Higher Love

Shepherd's Grace Church

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

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to

believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20: 19-31)

Welcome to Easter! For the past several weeks, I have been using that phrase to welcome you to the Lenten season. Suddenly, last week, everything changed. You remember! On Good Friday, we left in silence with only the faintest of hope, only the smallest flicker of light. Jesus, the light of the world was dead and the light had been extinguished. There was no possibility He could recover from the horrible crucifixion He had suffered!

There was only death, despair, sadness, sorrow! There was no hope! We heard it again this morning in the passage Rochelle shared with us. Thomas, one of the 12, an apostle, one of the closest to the Messiah was told that "He is Alive!" Even he, even one who spent time in close conversation and council with Jesus could not believe. All hope was gone!

Then, in the midst of doubt, the Lord showed up. The doors were locked and closed to keep out others who might want to harm the faithful. They were sequestered, "sheltered in place" to use a more appropriate term to today's situation. They were afraid!

How much more clearly can we understand the story today, in the midst of all we are facing, in the midst of closed doors and avoidance of others for fear of something we can not even see; how much more clearly can we understand the story! Still in the clarity of the moment, we are exhilarated even as Thomas and the others are as the Lord shows up.

Why, though should we be surprised? Why can we not remember the history of our relationship with God? Why can we not remember when after 40 days, the ark came to rest and dry land began to appear? Why can we not remember that after the longest of waits and in the most unusual of circumstances, God fulfilled God's promise to Abraham and Sarah? Why can we not recall how God's people, suffering under 400 years of slavery called out to the Lord and were delivered by Moses? Why should we be surprised?

God created us in God's image and likeness and God desires that we should be free. Even though we have to be separated for awhile to make that freedom more rich, we are still people created to be free! Our freedom is what inspires our love for neighbor and keeps us sheltered so we can protect our neighbor's freedom and treasure it for them as much as we treasure it for ourselves! Why then should we be surprised that God keeps God's promise and shows up in the moments when we cry out to Him, in the moments when we need Him most?

And yet, we are surprised! We are like Thomas. In our moments of greatest suffering and hurting, it is difficult for us to remember! In exactly these moments, in the moments when all hope is gone, God says to us, "welcome to Easter!" Welcome to the fulfillment of the promise yet again! Welcome to the restoration of hope! Welcome to salvation as only I can give you salvation! Welcome once again to Easter and to New life!

I believe this is exactly the point at which Peter enters the conversation today. In verse 3 of our reading this morning, Peter enters with a profound acclamation of praise. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!" Perhaps the real surprise in our scripture for this morning is that the author of these words is Peter!

On the other hand, perhaps even that should not be a surprise! Peter, the disciple who spoke at Jesus' last meal with the disciples and affirmed adamantly that he would never leave Jesus, that he would die with him if necessary is the one writing. Peter, the one who on the night before Jesus' crucifixion denied Jesus three times is the one writing. Peter, the one who stood far away on the hill watching as Christ was crucified is the one writing. Peter, the one who with the rest scattered when Jesus was pronounced dead on account of fear, the one who was behind locked doors because of fear...this Peter was the one writing.

Maybe our surprise will be lessened if we read the first two verses of Peter's letter. In those verses, we find Peter writing to the diaspora, the scattered. It is unclear if he is writing to scattered Christians or Jews but it really doesn't matter much. Peter is writing to the scattered. He is writing to those who have been pulled and torn and plied apart. When we recognize the audience to whom Peter is writing, we can recognize that there is no more perfect person to write.

There is no one who has been pulled more than Peter. There is no one who had been more torn than Peter. There is no one who has been more plied than Peter, the one who denied and deserted his savior and his God! Because of His experience, Peter is uniquely qualified to write and to invite the scattered to a salvation that he has recognized and decided to embrace!

As we consider the scattered for just a moment, we can ask ourselves if we are they. Who among us has not doubted, denied, deserted Jesus in times of difficulty? Who among us has not wondered if God could do all that God promised? As we listen to the words of Peter this morning, perhaps we wonder about our own faith and God's willingness to supply all we need in light of how little we give!

As we wrestle with the answer, let us once again examine the words of Peter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ!" Peter announces a blessing upon God. To bless from a human perspective is to give thanks. Peter is giving thanks to God! He is recognizing that even with all he has been through, God has gone with him. In denial and in dispersion, God has gone with him! God has walked with him in his time of doubt and has brought him back to a place of faith!

If you have your bible with you this day, look at John Chapter 13. There, Jesus tells Peter that He has prayed for him. That after his faith is shaken, God will return him to the mission to which Peter was first called. Jesus' prayer for Peter has been answered. He has lived through a time of doubt and has been restored.

Many of us have experienced this doubt in our lives. We have walked and wandered wondering if even God in Jesus could do all God promised in our lives. We have experienced isolation and deprivation and we have doubted. Maybe some of us doubt right now. Maybe some are tired of "Shelter in Place" and are feeling frustrated that we cannot see family and friends. I confess, my mother is in that place right now. She is in a strange place surrounded by strange people and she is unaware why she is there.

Everyday is a struggle and I can hear it in her voice in the phone calls I have with her everyday. I am not allowed to visit. She does not know why. I am not allowed to take her home. She does not know why. She is scattered from her friends and family and she does not understand why. Perhaps some of you are there today. Perhaps some of your relatives are there today.

Peter's message to you...to us today is to stand strong! Remember that God has raised Jesus from the dead but remember also that God has restored Peter, an ordinary man to faith even in the most dire of circumstances! Stand strong and bless God for the power God has and the power God will demonstrate for you! God will never leave you or forsake you! His promise to you is because of the prayer of Jesus.

Jesus prayed twice at that last meal. Once for Peter, once for all of us.(John 17) In his prayer for us, he asked for the same strength he asked for Peter. He asked for the same resolution and the same commitment. If God answered Jesus' prayer for Peter, then God will answer Jesus' prayer for all of us!
Blessed be God!

Peter recognizes the certainty of this fact as he tells us why God is to be blessed. God has given new birth! When we hear of this we are taken back to Jesus' visit with Nicodemus. In this visit, Jesus tells Nicodemus that "he must

be born again.” We remember that this new birth is not a birth from a woman but rather a begotten-ness, a birth from a man, or in a masculine sense, in other words as a creation of God.

It is the same kind of birth God gives in Genesis 2 where God alone breathes life into Adam and fills him with God’s Holy Spirit. The Hebrew word for this is Ruach which means wind or Spirit or breath. God’s wind, the wind that hovered above the face of the deep at creation, God’s spirit which moved on the Word (Jesus), God’s breath which gave life begets man in the first man and gives new birth to man as we receive it now.

According to Peter, the act of resurrection is a new birth; a dawning of a new day in the life of humanity. It is the fulfillment of a promise God makes later in John 3. “Whosoever believes in me shall not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus’ resurrection is the forthtelling of this new birth for all of us! It is our promise! It is our hope where all hope was gone!

On Good Friday, the light had gone out of the world, On Easter Sunday, the light is once again lit in the darkness of the tomb, the stone is rolled away, and our hope walks out. The empty tomb is the bright light that reminds us that God has fulfilled God’s promise, the new birth of hope!

More than that, it is the reminder of our inheritance! Because God has raised Jesus from the dead, God will raise us as well! That promise is indescribable Peter says. Indescribable because there are no human words able to express the magnificence of the gift! No eye can see, no ear can hear the glory of our God!

Even more than that, the promise is undefiled. There is no sin, no deceit, no desecration in it. God cannot tolerate such things and therefore, that which God promises is straight forward and without question. Corruption and evil do not exist in the promise. All that exists is the promise itself, made visible in Jesus who through resurrection invites all to resurrection.

This promise does not fade. Instead, it burns brightly in the darkness of the tomb. Yes! In the darkness of the tomb where no light seemed to exist but where now, only light exists, the light of the risen savior walking out into new life and the springtime promise that comes with it. When I traveled to Israel several years ago, I went to several places purporting to be the actual tomb where Jesus was laid. There is no clear evidence that any of them was the actual tomb. I had my personal favorite, but it occurred to me that all of them had one thing in common.

ALL OF THEM WERE EMPTY! THERE WAS A SIGN AT THE ENTRANCE TO EACH!
"HE IS NOT HERE! HE IS RISEN!"

If Jesus were in the tomb then all our faith would be a lie. Because the tomb is empty, we have a valid promise, "indescribable, undefiled and unfading!" The light burns brightly in the darkness of the empty grave! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

This promise is protected in heaven by the very power of God! From the beginning of time, it was always God's desire to dwell with God's people. He walked with Adam in the cool of the evening and in Revelation, it is written that there will be no sun or moon because God's light will be sufficient for us. God will dwell with us. God protects this promise and provides for us through the resurrection of Jesus a real way of knowing that our salvation has been secured!

That salvation will be revealed in the last days. Those days will happen for us when we walk through the door from this life to the next and the fullness of God's plan will be revealed. We will step outside of time and into the glory of eternity that will be introduced to us by the Risen Savior!

Until then, some of us might have to endure trials and testing. Peter was not just writing to those dispersed in his time, but also to all of us who find ourselves dispersed today. Corona is only one test. Separation is only one test. Struggle with family is only one test. All of these are difficult tests and they are all intended to remind us of the genuineness of our faith.

No one knew more about test than Peter. He must have wondered after he denied Jesus if God could ever love him again. He must have wondered after he stood far away and in fear if God could ever love him again. He must have wondered after he scattered with the rest of the disciples if God could ever love him again. Still he came back. Tested by fire, tested in faith.

He came back tested in a faith more precious than gold. It is that faith Peter calls us to this day. It is a faith refined by fire so that all the impurities can be skimmed from the top. It is a faith that is for everyone.

I have talked to many of you and many others who believe your sins are too great even for God to forgive. You believe no one could love you enough to look past your past. You know what? You are right! There is no person who can look past what any of us have done. God could not look past it either except as God looks at it through Jesus Christ. It is only by his work on the cross that He has made us clean enough to be able to stand in the presence of God!

I looked again this week at the cross that stands in our sanctuary. The sins you put up there on Ash Wednesday were written in red to symbolize the blood which would need to be shed for their forgiveness. When I looked, all I saw were pure white pieces of paper. Paper with your sins washed away! Paper made whiter than snow because Jesus took your sins upon himself and because he did, your sins are no longer visible, forgiven by a God who looks through Jesus to you and sees only the goodness He intended in your creation!

Receive this gift this morning and let your faith be refined in this gift so that when Jesus returns to you, you can give him all the praise, all the honor, all the glory!

Remember Thomas? Remember how he reacted when Jesus appeared to him in that second week? At first he doubted. He doubted the very power of God saying he could never believe unless he saw. When he saw, he fell to his knees! He said, "My Lord and My God!" He received the gift of faith! A faith renewed because of a promise kept. Christ, Raised from the dead!

Today, we have that same promise given! Christ is risen. The tomb is empty. Jesus is revealed. Peter says that when the revelation of Jesus has come, it is time for praise and honor and glory...all of it to be given to him! In this moment, let us give it all to Him! He is deserving because in his resurrection the promise of eternal life for all of us is fulfilled.

In this moment, the outcome of our faith is being made known. The tomb is empty! Higher love is prevailed. You know, from last night to this morning, I changed the title of this sermon. It was going to be the final sermon in the Lent/Easter series of sharing the story. I heard Keith Urban singing "Higher Love" last night and something spoke to me saying, "this is what your message is all about!" Higher love!

Because of the Higher Love of God, we can trust God's promise. It is a covenant between him and us. In Romans 5, Paul says it is unlikely that a person will lay down their life for another person. Perhaps, Paul says, a person will die for a good person, but not for a sinner. Paul then goes on to say that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us! (Rom. 5: 6) The depth, and width and length and breadth of this statement is profound. It is a "Higher Love!"

This Higher Love is the outcome of our faith and it brings us something more indescribable that we can ever imagine. It brings the very salvation of our souls!

These final words in the passage Peter shares with us today remind us that salvation is not something we seek for ourselves. Salvation is something we desire for all. John 6 invites us to know that Jesus mission is for the salvation of all that is given to him. The entirety of God's creation is what He is sent to save.

Right now, as we sit in our homes separated from one another, we must remember that we separate now, by choice. We stay apart because we hope for life for our brothers and sisters, our family and friends. This hope is from a new birth, a birth born out of disease and destruction but which will be overcome by the Power of God!

It will be overcome because of the "love" we have for one another. Certainly we are all concerned for our rights, but I was reminded this week that even though we have the rights to do some things, some things are just not right to do! As we conclude today, remember God is in control of the events of His creation and will bring us through by the power of an Higher Love.

Let this love guide you as you stay strong. Let this love guide you as you live in this moment. Feel the warmth of your neighbor's hand and the nearness of your neighbor's heart and let the "Higher Love" of God bless and keep you!
Amen!