

April 18 & 19, 2020
“The Genuineness of Faith”
Rev. Liz Whitford

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 Peter 1:3-9

This week we begin week 4 of our Safer at Home Order. We have been social distancing for over a month and have had a health emergency since March 12th. For some of us, we are utterly exhausted from being essential. For some of us, we are enjoying all the extra family time. For some of us, we are losing our minds, wishing for this time at home to be done so that we may go back to work and be around people. And everywhere in between.

We just celebrated an Easter like no other and had a devotion of hope even in unhappiness. As we continue in this season of Eastertide, we are brought to our scripture today which is actually part of the lectionary, the pre-selected scripture meant to go with this time of year. It does greatly speak to us during the time we are in.

As with many of the letters that are written in the Bible, there is the tendency to dance in circles and to use big church words. This scripture may be that way for you but let me assure you that we will see the light at the end of this tunnel as well. After all, this is a letter of encouragement.

The subtitle of this section that we read for today is “A Living Hope”. We see in the first verse that we are given a living hope through Jesus’ resurrection. But what is this hope? We are told it is an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, which is unlike anything we know. This inheritance in other words is something that cannot decay, cannot be spoiled, cannot disappear at any time. Really this is 3 descriptions of the same idea. What we have with Jesus’ resurrection is an inheritance that is always here for us.

Biblical Scholar David Bartlett wrote it well when he said, “Hope lives because it is based in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, his triumph over death. Hope lives because death cannot overcome it. Hope lives because even in the face of tribulation it does not back down or grow faint. Living hope is hope that gives life.” Bartlett also mentioned no matter how “difficult life may seem, God’s promise is signed and sealed and guaranteed.” That means that we do not have to worry about all that is going on right now. Even in our inability to have control, God has control. No matter what we experience, we still have God.

We are told within the scripture we should rejoice even when we suffer various trials. This may be harder for some than others. In fact, it really depends on how we understand suffering.

Is suffering something that can be withheld? Is suffering something that we can control? Is suffering something that we can reshape? Is suffering something we have to just live through? Is suffering something that teaches us something? Is suffering needed in this world? Is suffering caused by God or is suffering part of a sinful humanity? Is suffering all there is?

Today you may have noticed through our video that we have lilies on the altar. We think of Easter when we see lilies. Why is that? It’s not because that is the only time we see lilies. These beautiful trumpet-shaped flowers

have symbolized throughout the ages hope and life among a few other things. When we look at them we may remember Jesus bringing up lilies within scripture (Matthew 6 NRSV),

“...Do not worry...Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin...³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’³² ...indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Earlier this week, we had several government officials speak on our current situation of the virus. It was very hopeful, for me, to hear that Wisconsin is starting to flatten the curve. Now, I also recognize in my mind that this news does not mean that we are done being socially distant, but it does mean that we have done a good job to keep more people safe and healthy.

Because I watched these speeches live from Facebook I was able to see comments from individuals who were also watching the live feed. It saddened my heart to see so many angry people who did not understand the importance of flattening the curve. It saddened me how many people around our state need help and aren't receiving it.

It was with great conviction at the reaction that I saw from watching the Governor's speech that I wrote my post on Facebook which read, "Listening to the Governor live. We are flattening the curve, Wisconsin. Good job!! Remember that we are saving lives of God's children by staying at home. If you are struggling or upset by the stay at home order, reach out to your local church. We want to be there for you and help!"

This is what faith and hope is about. When I talk to people of the congregation, and talk to those I know around the world, when I look inside at my own feelings, I am tempted to view the world as if there is no light at the end of the tunnel. I mean, we don't even know when we will be able to see each other in person again. But, where is the hope in that.

While we celebrated Easter last week in a different way, the story is still in our minds. The resurrection still happened. Jesus still rose from the dead. We still have hope in the future because of the love that God has for us. This is the faith that we hold. This is the hope that will never fade. This, if we have the genuineness of faith, is where we turn and say, "God's got this."

The apostle Peter was the one to write the letter which we read from today people who were spread thin among several lands. These people were chased away from their homes because of persecution. Peter's letter to them was one of encouragement that convinced these dispersed people to remember that God's got this. The letter from Peter was only 5 chapters long. So, much shorter than many of the letters that Paul wrote, yet the people were given encouragement to keep fighting the good fight, remembering that God was with them, that their suffering would be over eventually, and they would be able to be together once again.

Our church may be empty right now. Our respective safe places are getting old to look at, perhaps. The grocery stores may be getting less and less friendly. Our lives may be feeling a bit empty. But there is hope.

This week we begin week 4 of our Safer at Home Order. We have been social distancing for over a month and have had a health emergency since March 12th. For some of us, we are utterly exhausted from being essential. For some of us, we are enjoying all the extra family time. For some of us, we are losing our minds, wishing for this time at home to be done so that we may go back to work and be around people. And everywhere in between.

Hope. It will not be like this forever. Hope. God has indeed got this. Hope. We are learning new ways of being connected and loving one another. Hope. We have never cared so much for the needs of those around us as we do in this present moment. Hope. Amen.

Prayer from Pastor Markus-

Hi Everyone,

Welcome to this fireside prayer time. It's been so cold this week, a nice warming fire is a good visual for us to come into the warming presence of our God.

I hope you feel the presence of God in your lives these days – but even if not: God invites you to come to him in prayer, regardless of how you're feeling about it.

Can I invite you to give yourself into the warming, cozy presence of our God who gives us new life and new hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Dear God,

It's been cold this week and sometimes we can't help but feel a bit cold when it comes to our faith. We need faith so much right now. It's good to remember that your son Jesus told us that even faith the size like a mustard seed is plenty.

By the power of your Holy Spirit, we ask you: grant us such faith, grant us faith that gives us just enough courage to encounter the challenges of our day to day life.

God, in faith we lift up all people who struggle – in their faith, in their health, in their work or lack thereof, in their finances, in their fears, or in their sense of hopelessness.

God, through the power of your risen Son, bless our community and our neighbors - whoever they may be. Awaken in us a sense of community that you desire so much for your whole human family. Help us to encourage each other in good practices of healthy living and eliminating chances to spread disease.

Help us to be reasonable and not to exaggerate our situation in this pandemic, so that we won't withdraw into complete isolation.

And over all Lord we ask you: help us to be Easter people, to live out your hope and your love, your power and your never ending presence in the midst of life and death.

Hear us as we pray...