

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 23, 2017
Second Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:14-32
Psalm 111
I Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

The apostle Peter's words to believers who have been scattered throughout Asia Minor in our epistle lesson today are fraught with ambiguity, and even tension.

On the one hand, there is reason for great joy, because God has raised Jesus from the dead, which means that these folks also have the privilege of being spiritually reborn and experiencing new life and a new start.

There is joy because not only does life change for the better *here and now*, but also because God is reserving something special for the *then and there*, an inheritance as Peter calls it, for when this life has run its course.

So there is great joy. A joy that is inexpressible, beyond words.

At the same time, Peter's hearers are realizing that although the resurrection of Jesus changes life for the better in the here and now, the transformation does not come about in typical or expected ways.

It might be easy for these believers to conclude that because Christ has been raised, all of their problems are over. To think that because the resurrection changes everything -- which it does -- that now they will be raised up somehow

and made exempt from the trials and tests that are part and parcel of living life. To think that the resurrection of Jesus is some “magic bullet” that helps people to escape the vagaries of life.

Imagine their surprise, then, when they experience sickness and disease.

Imagine their surprise when they experience financial hardship.

Imagine their shock when their children rebel and become prodigals.

Imagine their surprise when they lose their jobs.

Imagine their shock when someone they know and love commits suicide.

Imagine their anxiety when their life falls down around them, and all they have is their belief in One whom they cannot see.

It’s almost as if these believers had communicated with Peter in some way before he wrote this letter, saying to him, “Hey, Peter, if Christ has been raised, why is life trying to knock us to the canvas and put us down for the count? Where’s the joy in that?”

I can imagine Peter’s response in v. 6: “Be glad. Don’t lose your joy. This all leads somewhere, even though for right now things are tough for you.”

It’s probably providential that Peter’s words here in this letter were not addressed to a specific congregation, but to many different people who were scattered throughout Asia Minor. For truth be told, his words are addressed to *us*.

We know that the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. And yet we experience trials and tests. Christ may be walking the streets of gold, but the streets on which *we* live and walk sometimes shake our faith down to its very foundation. We are well acquainted with grief and disappointment and heartache. We still experience discrimination and injustice. We know what it's like to be misunderstood, to have our motives maligned and our intentions misrepresented.

We know what it's like to be ridiculed and marginalized for our faith. We know what it is to have our faith tested. *We* also struggle to trust in One who is unseen to us. *In our heart of hearts, there are times when we would prefer to be lifted up above our problems, or to have God remove our problems from us.*

But alas, the power of the resurrection is not a power that *exempts* us from life or lifts us up above the troubles of life. The power of the resurrection is a power that works *through* our trials and uses them to *refine* us, even as fire purifies gold. The power of the resurrection is a power that does not *remove* life's tests and trials, but *renews those who are being tested*, and brings them through on the other side with greater strength and courage.

If you want to know how strong a bridge is, you must put some weight on it and test it. If you want to know how strong a rope is, you must hang something (or someone!) on it! And if you want to determine the strength of a person's character, you *test* that person.

Ernest Hemingway once said: “The world breaks each of us; afterward, many are stronger at the broken places.”

Peter tells his group of dispersed believers, “It is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while.” The word “endure” is a military term which means to remain strong and courageous while under enemy fire. The power of the resurrection, says Peter, is not a power that removes you from the battle. It is a power that strengthens you, that fortifies you, that refines you, that burns away all of the dross until all that’s left is a faith which is pure gold.

I was reminded this week of that old and worn expression we sometimes use of people when we say: “They are as good as gold.”

But did you know this morning that *you* are as good as gold to God? In fact, you’re even better. For the power of the resurrection is at work in you, bearing you up and giving you strength every time life throws you a curve ball and tries to knock you down. The risen Christ is at work in you, so that you love him even though you’ve never seen him. The risen Christ is near you, so that even when you do not see him at work in your life, you *trust* him.

And here is some really good news this morning: the tests and trials we endure in life are temporary -- but the inheritance that awaits us is not. It is forever. It is eternal. It can never fade away.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, let us remember that the grace we receive here does not *exempt* us from life's struggles. It *empowers* us for life's struggles.

So rejoice and be glad. For the reward for trusting in the One you cannot see is the salvation of your souls.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.