

Living hope.

This week, at Women's Day Fellowship, we had an Easter devotion in which Lawrence and I looked at the Easter story from the points of view of some of the people present. I think we get used to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection as a complete package (which it is!), but as we looked at it from the points of view of different people we could see various details and nuances that we sometimes miss.

The characters of the various people came through each of the presentations, from Mary, Jesus' mother, to the centurion, to Caiaphas the High Priest.

One of the people that I shared the view of was the apostle Peter. As we see him in the gospel accounts, Peter is exuberant and impulsive. He says what he thinks, and he doesn't hesitate. Peter, of course, was one of the first disciples that Jesus called, he was with him throughout his ministry, he saw the miracles, he walked on water with Jesus, he was the first to state that Jesus was the messiah, he was present at the transfiguration when Jesus met with Moses and Elijah on the mountain, and he was the first disciple to go into the empty tomb on Easter Sunday.

Peter had assured Jesus that he would never deny him – but, just as Jesus had predicted, he did. He denied him three times. He had failed Jesus. But John's gospel records a wonderful exchange between Jesus and Peter on the shores of the sea of Galilee where Jesus reinstates Peter, and charges him with feeding his sheep.

Peter was always bold – the first to say things, the first to do things... but he was changed by Easter, changed by Jesus' resurrection. He became the leader that Jesus had called him to be – earlier in Matthew's gospel we read that Jesus had said to him "... I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:18-19)

Jesus' resurrection changed Peter – in fact it changed everything. It even changes us today. It opens the way for us to follow Jesus throughout our lives, through death and into everlasting life. We see things differently as we put our faith in Jesus, even though we can't see him for ourselves.

We heard about that in our gospel reading today – that well known story of 'Doubting Thomas' – when Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

And that is a theme that the apostle Peter himself picks up in our second reading today: "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."

As I read Peter's letters, I hear the exuberance and impulsiveness that we see in the gospel accounts of him. In contrast to the careful arguments that Paul gives in his letters, systematically moving from point to point, Peter shares ideas rapidly. In just the seven verses from chapter one we've had today, we hear an amazing array of ideas: praise, mercy, living hope, inheritance, heaven, God's power, salvation, and so on. It's generally thought that Peter would have dictated his letter to a secretary or scribe, and I can imagine Peter walking backwards and forwards speaking rapidly, and a scribe desperately trying to keep up!

In fact, in the original Greek of this passage, 1 Peter 1:3-9 is one very long sentence. Fortunately, our English translators have given us full stops at the end of verses 5, 6 and 7, which makes it a bit easier for us to read out loud, but I think it doesn't properly capture Peter's passion in writing it.

How ever Peter wrote this letter, though, he was writing to followers of Jesus many years after that first Easter – possibly as much as 30 years later. Peter had seen Jesus, of course, but it is unlikely that many – if any – of his original readers had ever seen Jesus in the flesh – most of them probably wouldn't have even met anyone who had.

Those followers of Jesus to whom Peter was writing were scattered throughout Asia Minor (modern day Türkiye), and they were likely facing the problems that many first century Christians faced - social rejection, economic hardship, and even persecution, simply because of their faith. They had been changed by coming to know Jesus, and they no longer fitted in – they had become outsiders in the societies that they had lived for years.

In this passage, Peter begins not by comforting those Christians in their troubles, but by praising God. Rather than saying “there, there,” he reminds them of the great hope they have. The living hope that they have in Jesus. “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 through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1:3)

I think that's something we need to be reminded of, too. The living hope that Peter wrote to those Christians all those years ago is the same living hope that we have today. In the face of all the troubles we face in our lives today, we need to hold on to that hope too.

Peter encourages his readers to look beyond their current circumstances, and he reminds them of the living hope that Jesus brings, and the glorious future that awaits them. Not the future that might await them, if they work hard enough, or if they give enough, or if they pray enough – but one that is certain, as he puts it, “...an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.”

I like to think of the “inheritance kept in heaven” that Peter tells us about as being like a hotel safe: You can wander the streets of some foreign city, with all its dangers, but you can know your passport and your important travel documents are all safely stored in your hotel safe. You cannot lose them. They're there, kept securely, for you.

And it is an inheritance for us: We are waiting for it and anticipating that inheritance which is kept for us: It is an inheritance that was secured for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and one day in the future, we will take hold of it.

Whatever our current struggles might, and we all have them, they are ultimately temporary – our hope in Jesus is everlasting and unshakeable. It is a living hope based on the greatest event in history - the resurrection of Jesus from the dead! Because Jesus conquered death, our hope can never die.

But even with that hope, that living hope, things aren't always going to be good for us. You may have noticed that things aren't always good for us – Peter writes “...though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” In the face of those trials, whatever they might be for us, we can rejoice – we should rejoice – because of what Jesus has done for us.

The trials, the problems, the difficulties that we all face are not without value, strange as that may seem. Peter tells us “[they] have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

The early Christians faced trials and persecution which tested the genuineness of their faith, a faith that Peter says is more precious than gold. In the first century AD, gold was the most precious thing; but Peter insists that faith in Jesus is far more precious than that most valuable of all metals.

Those first century Christians weren’t simply facing trials, but their trials would increase their faith so that their faith may “result in praise and glory and honour” when Jesus returns.

The faith that Peter writes about helps us persevere through all the struggles and trials of our own lives, it keeps us looking toward the resurrection and to the hope of our eternal inheritance. As we hold on to that faith, our suffering creates a deeper confidence that our faith is genuine, that it is a sure and certain hope – a living hope.

It doesn’t matter how much positive thinking we do, or how many self-help books we read, or how many motivational posters we look at, we can’t put a positive spin on the harsh realities of pain, suffering, and death. “No pain, no gain” might be a nice aphorism... but the truth is that many people experience pain without any benefit. “That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” might be a nice idea, but that which does kill you makes you dead... and we know that time does not, in fact, heal all wounds.

After all, keep in mind Peter’s original audience: he was writing to believers who were facing persecution. He doesn’t downplay what they’re experiencing, rather he tells them how to get through it.

What was going to get them through those things they were facing was Jesus’ death and resurrection. That is the assurance they had – and the assurance that we have today.

The things we face may be tough, but through them, our faith is refined and strengthened. And when that happens we can discover a deeper joy.

As followers of Jesus, as people who have that living hope, in whatever we go through, we need to focus on Jesus’ resurrection and our eternal inheritance which comes from that.

“Though you have not seen him,” writes Peter, “you love him”. That’s the outworking of what Jesus said to Thomas, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”.

That’s how it is for us, too: we haven’t seen Jesus, but we love him, and we know that he loves us, and we are, as Peter says, “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”

This isn’t just a fleeting happy feeling; it’s a profound, spiritual joy that is with us – and within us - even when things are hard. Because we know we are “receiving the end result of our faith, the salvation of our souls.” That’s the ultimate victory, and it fills us with a joy that words can’t fully capture!

All of what Peter says here hinges on what he said at the beginning of this passage: 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 through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

It all depends on the resurrection. We all know about the resurrection, of course – it is the centre of the Christian faith... but how does it affect us, as followers of Jesus?

After all, the apostle Paul wrote, in his first letter to the Corinthians, “...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1 Corinthians 15:14)

And yet the reverse of that is, if Jesus has conquered sin, death, and the grave when he rose three days later then that should change our lives.

As Christians, we have hope. A living hope. A hope that is often described as sure and certain.

People often think of ‘hope’ as little more than wishful thinking – “I hope I win the lottery.” or “I hope this works out.” or perhaps “I hope I don’t get caught...”

Hope, for many people in the world is simply what they want to happen.

But the reality is, such hopes and expectations are controlled by the circumstances of our lives. You might win the lottery... or you might get caught. There’s an ad on tv at the moment (and I can’t remember what it’s for – so the ad is not working!), which says something like “the thing about luck is there’s only a limited amount to go round”. Sure, sometimes those hopes work out, but mostly they don’t.

That might be the way most of the world thinks of hope, but that is not the sort of hope that we as followers of Jesus have.

Our hope isn’t based on chance or luck or what’s going on around us.

Our hope is based on the fact that Jesus rose from the grave. He is risen. He lives. And so our hope is a living hope.

As we have a living hope, we should also be living that hope in our lives. Let us declare that hope and join in Peter’s joyous exclamation:

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 through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

Amen.