

Two weeks ago, we heard Matthew's resurrection story – earthquakes and angels and the two Marys running from the tomb. Last week, Rev. Justin read us Thomas's resurrection story – scarred hands and an eye-to-eye personal encounter with Jesus.

Today, we hear another resurrection story. Peter writes to several churches about what the resurrection has meant to him in the years that have passed since Jesus rose.

Now, I think of Peter as a stereotypical country guy. He knew how to handle a fishing boat. He knew how to mend fishing nets. He knew how to camp out under the stars. He wasn't a city guy. He wasn't highly educated. He reminds me more of the family I have in rural Kentucky. The kind of person who not only can live off grid but prefers to – as long as he has satellite tv to watch Kentucky basketball.

When Jesus called Peter to be a disciple, I trust that he knew what he was doing, but it was rough going at first. Peter is impulsive. Stubborn. Acts first and asks questions later. Sticks his foot in his mouth.

In the gospels, which is how most of us are most familiar with Peter, he is the redneck hillbilly with leadership skills. But if you read about Peter at any point after the gospels announce Jesus has risen, . . . you read about a brilliant pastor and preacher, a miracle worker, a faithful, Spirit-led, visionary who handles the chaos of the next thirty years with poise and skill. He is articulate. He sounds like a theology school professor. Walter Bruggeman and Frederich Buechner and Billy Graham all rolled into one.

Here, just listen to these words from the letter we call 1 Peter.

<sup>3</sup>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 <sup>4</sup>and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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, <sup>9</sup>for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

This is the word of the Lord through the Apostle Peter. **Thanks be to God.**

Ok, who is this man? Where did the redneck go? He is using grown-up words to express theologically loaded thoughts! It's a mouthful to get through, and quite a set of run on sentences, at that!

This reminds me of one of the books that I was assigned in my senior seminar at Vanderbilt. It was called, *The Sacred and the Profane*, and I was reading it at home on a Thanksgiving break. The first sentence was 17 lines of text long. I showed my mom, and she looked at it as if it were in a foreign language. You don't even know where to start with text like this!

So, let's break it down. First, Peter is writing to a group of young churches that are mostly made up of marginalized, powerless people. Free women and male and female slaves, primarily. These pockets of Jesus followers were on the outskirts of society. We began with verse 3, but in verses one and two, Peter mentions that this letter is specifically to Jesus followers in the areas of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. These are not major cities like Jerusalem or Rome, but they are regions, rural regions, and if you put them all together on a map, they make up almost all of modern day Turkey, except the

southern coastal bits that we know more about. They're inland, rural, and far apart from each other.

And Peter hints in verse six that they've all been facing some trials. Different translations have different descriptions of what they've been through. One says grief. One says aggravations. Another says troubles. In general, we get a sense that Peter knows that every one of these various churches in various regions is full of people who are struggling. There are no specific details, but there is a universal acknowledgement of things not going well.

And that's one of the reasons that a letter like this is so valuable to us. *Because* it's not overly specific, it can speak directly to us. Peter wasn't writing to one individual who had been arrested because of her faith, or one gentleman who had a chronic illness and couldn't support his family. He wrote a letter that would be passed along to multiple churches across hundreds of miles. And his one letter speaks to all of them.

I know you have been going through some hardship. Maybe it was economic, maybe it was physical. Maybe it was persecution by a community that didn't appreciate a new religious tradition in their midst. Or maybe it was a natural disaster. We don't know, but that makes his message more relatable to us.

How many of us could honestly say that we have been undergoing various trials recently? How many of you have felt aggravated lately? Or grieved recently or suffered recently? Is that everyone? Let me just say, if you haven't felt that way over the last twelve months or so, what bubble have you been living in? Tell me your secret.

But I told you earlier that this letter was about how the resurrection of Jesus had affected Peter, and here's the key. Peter says in the letter that despite your suffering, you have a source of joy. Your joy is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's what is feeding you and sustaining you through your troubles. The resurrection of Jesus is the wellspring of life that keeps you cool inside despite the dumpster fire that surrounds you. The message of the first Easter morning is the hope that inspires you to step in front of the metaphorical boulder that's rolling downhill. The empty tomb gives you the courage that compels you to

give love to your enemies, help the strangers, stretch beyond your comfort zone. It's Jesus, winning the battle over sin and death, that gives you hope and joy that cannot be suffocated by the weight of this world.

Peter says, life here is temporary. Suffering here is temporary, and while we endure some suffering, and we know that some of our neighbors and fellow earthlings suffer far more than we privileged few do, we believe that whatever we're going through in this life is just a drop in the ocean compared to the eternal reward that's waiting for us, and that's good news.

Those who suffer and yet believe, those who endure and do not turn their backs on God and blame God for suffering, those who follow the way of Jesus Christ, are promised a resurrection just like that of Jesus Christ.

Every day. Every single day. We are to live as people who are bound for glory in heaven. We are to live with confidence and joy and hope and peace despite all the suffering that we endure and that lives around us. In 1986, in the midst of the Cold War, when people lived with the constant fear of nuclear holocaust, Pope John Paul II claimed the words of Augustine and said, "We [who believe in Jesus] are the Easter people and allelujah is our song."

Easter is not one day of the year. Easter is every day. French author Victor Hugo, who wrote *Les Miserables*, said, "Dawn and resurrection are synonymous. The reappearance of the light is the same as the survival of the soul." Every day, we are reminded of Easter morning. Every dawn we get a chance to begin a new life, a new commitment to finding Jesus and following him.

Peter is writing that Easter isn't one day on our calendar. Every Sunday at church is a mini-Easter. Every morning when the sun rises and we believe that Jesus still lives, we celebrate his resurrection and we believe in our own to come.

We may get distracted by the things of this world. Gas prices or politics or frustrations at work or medical problems. Some of us in this room are battling cancer,

addiction, or have experienced abuse. I do not for one second mean to dismiss any of our suffering as insignificant.

I just want to remind us, in the midst of our various trials and sufferings and aggravations and griefs that we are not first and foremost people who identify as victims of our circumstances. We are not, first and foremost, labeled by our job titles or our race. We are not to be identified as Democrats or Republicans or Independents. We are Easter people, children of God, believers in Jesus Christ, people who, as Peter said, love Jesus, even though we have not seen Jesus. And one of our most important jobs, in the midst of the chaos of this world, is to act like it.

I want to remind you of a quote that I've used before. I guarantee I'll use it again. It's from author Dan Savage who co-created the It Gets Better movement. He wrote, *"During the darkest days of the AIDS crisis we buried our friends in the morning, we protested in the afternoon, and we danced all night, and it was the dance that kept us in the fight because it was the dance we were fighting for."*

That's what Peter is saying. Life is hard enough as it is. For his first readers – people without any power in society, people who were literal slaves and women who were considered property, people who lived without human rights, indoor plumbing, antibiotics – they knew suffering that we can never imagine. But Peter said, God loves you so much. And your faith is so pure. You've trusted in Jesus, who you've only heard about. I got to live with him. You, my friends, did not, and yet you love him so much you can laugh and sing and dance when you worship him.

God will reward your faith, with eternal life, even if you bury your friends in the morning and suffer through the afternoon. When you read this letter together, don't be ashamed to dance. That's how great our joy is that Jesus lives. Amen.