

“Seeing and Believing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 19, 2020

2nd Sunday of Easter

Psalm 16

Rev. John Wahl

I Peter 1:3-9

Two months ago, I sat with our deacons on a Sunday after church as we planned out the details for a church-wide luncheon originally scheduled for today. This is just one example – a relatively small one – of how our world has changed in ways that we did not anticipate and, for the most part, are out of our control. So many of our plans have changed or have been put on hold during the midst of this health crisis; to an extent that we still cannot fully understand. “How long?” has become the question on many people’s minds and lips. How long until it is safe for us to emerge from our homes? How long until we are once again able to see our families; to return to schools, work, and church gatherings?

The message of this Easter season – for us, as Christians – is that the uncertainty of the *near* future, however, is overshadowed by the blessed assurance of knowing that the risen Jesus is Lord not only of the present and the near future, uncertain as those might seem to be, but also of our ultimate futures. Christ serves as a companion in our suffering; in his journey from the cross to the grave and beyond, Jesus experienced the fullness of death, followed by the gracious gift of new life. This same future is promised to us; we who are inheritors of new life in Christ.

In these opening verses of I Peter, the promise of new birth is described as a living hope. This regeneration is not a one-time event: it is an ongoing process. When we feel challenged by difficult circumstances such as suffering and the uncertainty that surrounds it, our faith reminds us that our living hope can be renewed.¹

This hope is kept alive by nurturing it; by looking beyond painful present circumstances or the uncertainty of the near future to a promised future; remembering that we have been given an inheritance by God that awaits us. Our

¹ Jennifer Kaalund from *WorkingPreacher.com*

faith in Jesus – faith that is supported through worship, prayer, fellowship, and service – makes this possible. As is said in the Epistle of Hebrews: “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (11:1)

First Peter is one of the General Epistles – meaning that it was not addressed to one particular church, but was intended to be shared among a group of churches in the same region. What these similarly located congregations share as a common experience is that they bear the name “Christian.” The Epistle’s author describes them as “exiles” and “aliens,” recalling the long history of Jews living away from Israel, scattered among surrounding pagan nations; and suggesting that they share a similar experience of alienation.

Christians who were not native citizens – which may have been the majority of Christians in this region of Asia Minor – would be vulnerable to abusive treatment by both their neighbors and local authorities. As resident aliens, they were culturally and religiously different from the majority population. They paid their share of taxes but were denied the legal protections that citizens enjoyed.

There is some debate among biblical scholars over the extent to which the recipients of this letter are experiencing true suffering; ranging from state-sanctioned persecution to being rejected or ostracized as aliens in their communities. In either case, their suffering is challenging to their faith; it shapes their current identity as Christians who must be nurtured in a faith that will allow them to maintain a living hope in things they do not currently see.

Their inheritance is protected by the power of God, even if their present circumstances mean they will suffer. These present trials can serve to strengthen their faith. This is not to say that suffering is necessary to produce faith, but is simply an acknowledgement that just as fire refines the beauty of gold, our trials can reveal the living hope of faith.

I’m sure that in this current situation, you have seen – whether on television or in news articles or through stories that have been shared – that there is beauty being created in the midst of the suffering that surrounds us. We see examples of neighbors caring for one another, people offering thanks to first-line responders, health-care workers, and caregivers. Girl scouts are sewing masks and restaurant workers are feeding the homeless. This week, a group of hospital workers from Cleveland left for New York to serve in that hard-hit area for a month.

We, of course, admire and want to thank those individuals who display the courage and commitment to place themselves in harm’s way for the sake of the

common good. In ways large and small, each of us has been asked to change the way we live for the time being. All of us are now something like resident aliens; exiles from the ways of doing things that we have come to know and understand. Not surprisingly, the patience and available resources for some people is wearing thin. Lines at food banks are long. Promised relief from the government has been slow to arrive. The most vulnerable among us have been the hardest hit. As individuals and as communities, we are being tested and tried.

When we look back to the situation of the resident alien Christians to whom this epistle was addressed, we discover words of assurance that though they cannot see Christ, they love him and believe in him. Their faith does not remove whatever present suffering they might encounter; still, they are encouraged to have a longer-term focus; one that anticipates the joy that has been promised to them through Christ. As exiled Christians, they are defined not so much by where they live or how they are treated by those around them, but by the inheritance that awaits them: participation in God's eternal realm.

One of the post-resurrection accounts that is often read after Easter – the suggested Common Lectionary gospel for this Sunday – is the story of Doubting Thomas. You might remember this one. On the night of that first Easter Sunday, the bewildered disciples were gathered together in a locked room when Jesus suddenly appeared to them, offering them peace and breathing upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit. But one of the twelve, Thomas, was not there, and would not believe the testimony of his fellow disciples. And so, a week later, when they were together again in the same place, Jesus appeared for a second time, showing Thomas the wounds on his hands and side. After encouraging Thomas to believe rather than doubt, Jesus says, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29b)

For many people, our current situation has created not only suffering and uncertainty, but it has also raised doubts. We wonder not just about how long these present challenges will last, but whether things will ever return to what we thought was normal. Will the local businesses and restaurants we love still be there? Will those who have lost jobs get them back? Will there be concerts and sporting events? Will faith communities be the same?

Though none of us yet have the answers to these questions, the living hope that we have been promised through Christ can help us to live in and finally through our doubts. Hope is a state of expectation; it is to be pregnant with anticipation for something new, something different or something more. And though faith is concerned with what we cannot see, hope provides us vision beyond

what we can see. Despite our current circumstances, beyond our suffering or our anxieties, the resurrection of Jesus and its promise of new life fills us with the possibility to have hope and renew our faith.

Those who have faith in Christ are always in the process of receiving new birth. Even in times of suffering and uncertainty, when we doubt what the future holds, there are signs that the gold is being refined; that beauty can and will emerge even out of most difficult circumstances. If we look only into the near future, this can be hard to see. If we focus only on the question of “how long?” then we might be tempted to lose hope. But faith – and the practices of worship, prayer, fellowship and service that build up faith – helps us to believe even when we cannot see; to maintain hope even when signs of new life are not yet apparent.

As the community of believers – not able to presently gather but still bound together by our common faith – we are presently being called to support one another in this project of hope. While our health-care workers and others are serving on the front-line – even traveling to the epicenter of the crisis – it is up to their neighbors to keep their home community safe and strong. While some among us are struggling to make rent or worrying about a family member who is living alone or in a care facility, the rest of us need to offer encouragement and help. While some among us are doubting where and how new life will appear, others of us can be a blessing to those who cannot see.

People of God, these are difficult days for exiles in a foreign land; a place that is difficult for us right now to recognize or understand. It is made even harder because we know that others among us are facing tests far more trying than we could imagine. For them, and for the familiar home that we long again to share, we are called upon to practice the faith of a living hope in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.