

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” With these powerful words at the very beginning of his first epistle, the Apostle Peter celebrates one of the greatest of our Easter blessings, the blessing of a living hope. We Christians are a people of hope, a people who look forward to something better still to come. Unlike the hopes that we and others may cherish for better things in our lives here on earth, however, the living hope that is ours as Christians reaches beyond the changing and perishable things of this life to an eternal inheritance in heavenly glory. And it is hope that is sure, solid and guaranteed, because it rests on the unshakeable foundation of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The Scripture lessons during the Easter season remind us of our Christian hope and its foundation. And they encourage us in that hope as they focus our attention on the risen and living Christ. The fact that we are people of hope gives us Christians a unique perspective on life. Indeed, it determines our whole approach to life. In our text for today the Apostle Peter teaches that living hope will result in living in hope, as he urges his 1<sup>st</sup> Century readers and believers of every age to LIVE YOUR EASTER HOPE, showing us I. The foundation of living hope II. The evidence of that hope

What a wonderful opportunity the six weeks of the Easter season provide us Christians to “stand at the top of the mountain,” so to speak, and look down with thankful wonder at the magnificent panorama of our salvation. As we look, we see Jesus – born into this world as a true human being; revealed in the world by word and deed as the God-man, sent by the Father to carry out his great salvation plan; humbling himself to the depths to carry out the work of saving sinners; and declaring his victory and ours by his resurrection from the dead.

It was surely that grand panorama of God’s salvation plan about which St. Peter was thinking, as in our text he reviews for us the awesome price that God demanded, and that Jesus paid to redeem a sinful world. The eternal inheritance which is the object of believers’ hope, the apostle declares, was not purchased with earthly goods or treasures; nor could it be. Silver can’t pay for sin. Gold can’t cancel guilt. Even the most valuable earthly treasures can’t ransom immortal souls from the curse and guilt and dominion of sin.

God clearly taught that lesson to his Old Testament people with the worship system that he instituted for them. At the heart of that system were the sacrifices and the shedding of the blood of those sacrifices. The lesson was clear. Sin outrages the holy God. He demands that every sin be paid for. Shed blood, not money or earthly treasures, alone can satisfy his justice and atone for guilt. The blood of those animal sacrifices, however, in and of itself, certainly couldn’t pay for human sin. The fact that they had to be repeated over and over again showed that they were not God’s final answer to the problem of human guilt. But they were shadowy pictures, pictures that God gave to point ahead to a permanent, once and for all ransom payment that he himself would provide for sinful human beings. That ransom payment would require a perfect sacrifice, a sacrifice unlike any other. It would require the shed blood and innocent death of a victim who

would have to be more than just a human being. The blood and death of a sinful human being could not be a sufficient ransom payment for sin. But the one who could offer a perfect sacrifice to God would have to be both human and divine: human to be a substitute for sinful human beings; divine to give the sacrifice redemptive value.

Jesus was the perfect victim foreshadowed by those Old Testament sacrifices. The sacrificial animals offered on the Old Testament altars had to be physically perfect and without blemish to be acceptable to God. Jesus offered himself as the perfect, sinless substitute for sinful humanity. His blood, shed on Calvary's cross, was holy and precious because Jesus, who by his incarnation and birth took on a true human nature, was and is, and never ceased to be true God. Only Jesus the God-man, could and did fulfill God's law perfectly by his sinless life as mankind's substitute. Only Jesus could and did die an innocent death to pay the ransom price God's justice demanded for the sins of all the world. God the Father declared Jesus' sacrifice complete and the world of sinners ransomed and justified by raising Jesus from the dead. And the living and victorious Jesus provides his followers with forgiveness of sins, new life and a living hope.

By his atoning work as mankind's perfect substitute Jesus redeemed sinners, not only from sin's guilt and condemnation, but also from sin's dominion. "You were redeemed," Peter writes, "From the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers." Since our first parents fell into sin, all human beings are by birth and nature sinful. All inherit a nature inclined only to sin and selfishness. That sinful, corrupt nature can only produce lives that, in the end, are empty and meaningless. Many of Peter's 1<sup>st</sup> Century readers came from pagan backgrounds and knew the empty way of life paganism offered. What comfort or hope could anyone expect from those mythical gods the heathen invented and worshiped, gods with all too human characteristics and failings? Or what hope could Greek philosophy offer? Stoics said, "Endure life and its miseries bravely; there's nothing you can do about it anyway." Epicureans, on the other hand, taught, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die – and, after death, nothing." What emptiness! And Judaism offered only a lengthy set of laws, rules and ceremonies, which led its followers either to unjustified pride or to hopeless despair.

From this vain thinking and empty living, Peter proclaims, Christians have been redeemed. "Look to Jesus," Peter again encourages his readers. Look to Jesus and find living hope. What God in grace determined from eternity has now been carried out in human history. Jesus lived, died and rose again and now rules at God's right hand. And sinners are redeemed. By the faith the Holy Spirit works in human hearts through the gospel, the blessings Jesus won for the world of sinners belong to each believer. As redeemed children of God through faith in Jesus believers are free from sin; free from guilt; free from hopelessness and despair. They have been raised from the death of sin and all its emptiness and despair and given a living hope that changes everything. Believers' lives now have real meaning and purpose. We have hope, and we live lives of hope. And it's all guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Believers' living hope is an eager looking forward to a glorious future. But it's also a powerful motive for the way we live our lives right now. Peter points to that truth in our text when he urges believers to "Conduct yourselves during the

time of your pilgrimage in reverence." As people who live in hope, we Christians have a perspective on life that no one else has. We see our lives as God wants us to see them: as a pilgrimage: a temporary journey to a permanent home and a time of grace during which we prepare to enter that home. Our living hope will prompt us to live those lives in reverence, in constant awareness of our relationship to our living Lord.

But our pilgrimage of hope is lived in a hostile world, a world in which a host of spiritual enemies, including the sinful nature which lurks within all of us, are working overtime to drag us back down into that empty and hopeless way of life from which we have been redeemed. Living reverent lives, therefore, will mean being spiritually watchful and alert. Christians who live reverently, or, as another translation puts it, "in reverent fear," need to be careful not to become too attached to this life and to worldly things. That's a constant, difficult struggle in a materialistic society and a greedy world. But it's a struggle for which the Lord himself equips us. Every day he provides us with the spiritual strength we need for living reverent lives as he comes to us with the power of his Spirit through his Word and sacrament. Those means of grace remind us daily of our blessed status as redeemed children of God. They encourage and empower us to live lives that reflect our redeemed relationship with our Lord. They reassure us of our living hope when the journey is difficult. They move us to share our hope in words and actions with those around us. And they strengthen us in the faith that holds fast to the risen Savior and his righteousness, which alone will enable us to stand justified and victorious when we are called to appear before the judgment seat of God. Then, one day, faith will change to sight, hope will be fully realized, and we will share completely and fully in the eternal inheritance that our crucified, risen and glorified Savior won for us.

I have no doubt that St. Peter's words in our text were in the heart and mind of Martin Luther when he wrote his magnificent words of explanation to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of the Apostle's Creed, words which many of us have memorized and hold dear and which are still used to teach our young people the great truths of believers' living hope. "(Jesus) has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death, and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today and every day of your earthly pilgrimage, live your Easter hope. Amen.

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