

## Easter 2 The Gift of Faith April 19 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Today, Luke, Peter and John all have wonderful news for the faithful who find themselves sequestered in their homes, unable to go to church. Jesus notices them and blesses them. Peter also points to their faith, and the love which comes from that faith, and he encourages and blesses them as well. This is not a day to grump about not being able to go to church, but to be amazed at the blessings God has brought. This is a day to concentrate on the miracle of faith which God works in his people and the many little and large miracles that come with it.

Today we focus on some faith issues. The chief concern when discussing faith is to remember that faith is a gift from God. Our contemporary culture sees it as a virtue and an act of the will, but Scripture consistently sees it as a gift from God, a relationship which He has established and which we can enjoy. Like an adopted child – the very metaphor which Peter will use today – we have been taken into God’s arms and He has bestowed upon us His name, claims our hearts, guarantees us His love. That relationship is the faith. Indeed, the little child who is adopted will come to love and trust in the parent, but that love and that trust are located inside that relationship. The child did not create the relationship, or decide to welcome the parent into his or her heart, etc. God has done that.

So, what is the difference between faith and belief? Is there one? It is important to note that Greek has a noun and a verb form of the word “faith.” English only has the noun, faith, but no verb. There is no English word like “faithing” and so we are saddled with using a substitute verb form, “believing,” taken from the noun, “belief.” Is that important? Have we, because of this issue in our language, confused the two? I think so. I think too many of our folk see faith as a weak form of knowledge.

Let’s do a little test: If you **know** someone will be at church or if you **believe** someone will be at church, which of those two statements suggests I am more certain? Most folk will suggest that knowledge is more certain than believing. That’s the way English works right now.

Be aware that the ancients who wrote your Bible and centuries of its interpreters have normally reversed that, suggesting that our senses and human understanding or knowledge deceive us, but faith is more certain and differently certain. It is much more like that little child resting in her father's arms than it is book knowledge and facts about Jesus and the Bible.

God sees the faith which He has created in his people and He delights in it. It may not look like much to us, in fact, we can sometimes hardly see it, but God has much more penetrating vision than we do and He loves that relationship which He has established in Christ and when it shows up, He blesses.

Now why do I bring that up? Well, St. Peter says, "Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." Some translations render the last part of the verse as, "The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls." This implies that faith is a work by which we earn a reward. But a proper translation recognizes that the Greek word "telos" is best translated "the end or result or outcome of faith(ing) is your salvation." Faith is a gift that we get by hearing the Word of God. And the object of saving faith is Jesus Christ, his person and work for you.

We are the adopted children of God, promised an astounding inheritance which the entire world shall see on that last day. But now, while we wait, we are given a certainty in the promises of Jesus. For though we have not seen him, we faith, we love him, and in that love and faith, we have joy. This may present a contrast with what we experience here and now, but that means that our joy simply stands out all the more. That we are a people that can have hope and joy despite our circumstances is our best evangelistic tool. The joy we feel in Christ is contagious.

Peter uses three adjectives to describe the hope which is a living hope: imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

Peter himself may be the best example of this. He has an imperishable hope – the Sanhedrin literally tries to beat it out of him. Peter's hope is undefiled – not because Peter got it right; he got it profoundly wrong, but Jesus restored him to that hope.

Peter's hope is unfading – we see that in this reading. Peter and his people are persecuted, it is likely he is facing his own martyr's death. But Peter's inheritance is kept in heaven, as is ours, out of reach of our enemy. God holds it in His strong hands.

That joy, born of the hope we have in Christ Jesus because he has died and is risen from the grave, is an incredibly attractive thing to people, especially, as Peter notes here, when it is seen amid trials. The earliest Christians often sang when they were thrown to the lions in Roman amphitheaters. The Romans marveled at their faith in action and flocked to the Christian movement.

We **died** in baptism and were given a new life that day. That life is **not** the life that dies on the day the world **sees** us die. That life is eternal and it is now. We do not start our eternal life sometime in the future. It started on the day we were baptized. Peter writes to his persecuted people to live **that** life; it is imperishable and unfading.

Pope John Paul II said, “Do not abandon yourselves to despair: We are the Easter people and Hallelujah is our song.”

We often confess the resurrection but we struggle to see that confession take shape in life and word. We **want** to trust the many promises that God has made to each one of us. That is the difference we **want** Easter to make in our lives. We can see **that** taking shape when we approach suffering as Peter's people were called to do. We can see it in the way we approach not only death, but also work, relationships, and neighbors. When we love, we abide in God and He abides in us. That is good. Jesus lives, but our faith in that fact does not end there – it manifests itself when we feed the hungry, when we befriend the lonely, and when we love our fellow sinner.

Our Gospel reading said, “<sup>9</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>20</sup> When He had said this, He showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.” He was giving them faith.

Similarly, St. John says, “<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not dis-faith, but faith.’ And <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” And in this way the Lord gave Thomas faith also.

And John’s account continues, “<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, ‘Have you faithed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have faithed.’” Those are words of hope to us! We have faithed in things not yet seen.

Jesus was right there when Thomas expressed his doubts. Jesus, the resurrected Lord is with us as well. That is **His** promise to **us**. That is really good news when you remember Jesus has holes in his hands and feet that Thomas once touched and which are the marks of His forgiveness **for us**. And when Jesus confronted Thomas, it was not with a lightning bolt or some sort of retribution, but with those wounded hands and side. And Thomas was led to kneel and offer the only words which he could say, “My Lord and my God.”

St. John says, “These words are written so that you may believe.” Jesus is glad that Thomas has seen and believes, that he makes his confession. But our faith, without the sight, is even more precious in Jesus’ sight. He blesses you and me, and all who faith in these words today. Jesus blesses all those who faith without seeing. Jesus says to them that their faith puts them into a blessed position which even Thomas does not enjoy.

This is hard for us. We really resonate with Thomas in this. We want to put out our hands and touch, see, prove to ourselves that this is real. But not many of us will get that chance, at least not like Thomas. Yet, John doesn’t seem to think that we need it. Indeed, he seems to suggest that the one who believes without that touch and sight is “blessed.” How does that blessing happen? How does the Thomas in me get faith?

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who does this. Word and Sacraments are the go-to tools here. The question is not whether we have faith; the question is whether we have Christ.

The answer to that is that Christ has baptized us; Christ has fed us with himself, Christ has been proclaimed to us and we have been washed in His Word and Spirit. The question is not whether we believe, but whether Christ has died for us, has He forgiven our sins. When we say yes to these things, Jesus turns to us today and says, “Blessed are you!”

And Jesus has also done something about our **unbelief**. He loved us even before we knew Him. He has sent John and given him to write a book. He has sent his evangelists and pastors and parents and loved ones into our life to be the conduit of his grace to us. He has claimed us as His child, heirs of His kingdom through Holy Baptism. He gives us His gift of faith through His mighty Word. As His Word enters our ears, it creates faith and carries the comforting power of the Holy Spirit. And He comes to us in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion, His very body and blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith.

Let’s say “Amen” to that! Alleluia, Christ has risen! He has risen indeed, Alleluia!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!