

“AN EASTER LETTER FROM PETER”

1 Peter 1:117-35 April 26, 2020

This is the Third Sunday of Easter. Here’s an odd thing about that. Have you noticed in this season how the preposition changed? It might not be something you’ve paid attention to, but there is a subtle shift in the way we talk about the season after Easter and the way we talked about Lent, for example. In March we named each Sunday as “___ Sunday in Lent.” But now we name them as “___ Sunday of Easter.” From *in* to *of*. But is this really such a big deal? Perhaps not, but there is significance to the change, and it is a significance worth noting in worship.

We are Easter people. That’s what it means ultimately. The Easter event has changed our essence; we are “of Easter.” *Of* Easter. We are **of Easter**. We chose to go through Lent; we find ourselves in Lent, a season of confession and repentance. But Easter finds us; it becomes us. We are Lenten people only for a short time and from a distance—at arm’s length, but we are Easter people for all time.

“The season of Easter” is not a time for worm thinking!! It is a time for claiming the gift of abundant life. It is a time for picking ourselves and one another up when we have fallen to get our feet back on the path toward kin-dom of God (or back on the dance floor where we can express our joy in whose we have become).

Again, looking at the calendar, Sundays after Easter Sunday are called the Sundays of Easter. It’s as if one Sunday can’t contain all that Easter is about. We need a second Sunday of Easter and a third and fourth, fifth and sixth too. We too often want to be back to normal, to the same old, same old. But that’s the whole point of Easter; there is no same old anymore—on many levels of our lives. Everything is new. We might be living in a Good Friday kind of world, but, friends, we are **of Easter**.

That being said—let’s let an old fisherman have a word. The epistle lesson walks us through this short Eastertide series called “Revive Us Again.” Who better than Peter, the one who needed Resurrection almost as much as the crucified Jesus did?

While we have previously acknowledged the debates about the authorship of this letter, it is easy to see at least the spirit of Peter in this letter. He’s hanging around the edges, it seems. And here in our text for this week he wants to talk about the permanence. Ironic, don’t you think? The rock that cracked under pressure is not contrasting the perishable with the unperishable. Or he is inviting us to be set in the unperishable rather than the perishable.

The letter begins with imperatives, four of them. We are going to be focusing this morning on the third of those four. And it is an imperative to live in reverent fear. What? That makes us pause and ask ourselves “Why?” would we want to do that?!?!? Fear as a motivator is at best a double-edged sword and at worst the source of all that is wrong with the faith today. So why would Peter or whoever wrote in his name use such a tactic—especially when you look at the other imperatives in this first chapter of the epistle? First, “believe in him and rejoice” (v.8). Second, “become holy in every aspect of life” (v. 15). And fourth, “love one another deeply from the heart” (v. 22). All of which we can embrace wholeheartedly and proclaim powerfully. But fear?

“If you invoke the Father, the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile” (1:17).

There are a lot of different ways we can approach this verse. On one level, it is simply saying “Don’t go around calling God your Father if you aren’t going to live as though God was your judge.” Take it seriously, in other words. Let it mean something, this relationship with the Almighty; something transforming; something encouraging; something that calls you up short when you venture too close to the edge of temptation.

Reverent fear isn’t about terror or terrorizing. It is about being aware of the implications of your actions, your choices, your words, your life. It is a way of saying that your life matters. So, Peter says, set your life in something that survives, something that matters, something imperishable.

Peter says an amazing thing in that perishable/imperishable bit of his argument. He says that you were ransomed from futility, not with perishable things like silver and gold, but with blood. At first glance, you might think he got the terms mixed up. What could be more lasting than gold, for heaven’s sake?

Even when currencies rise and fall, gold continues to be a safe bet for assets. But Peter doesn’t think so. His long-term planning has gotten really long-term. And even silver and gold won’t sustain you; it won’t last. What will last is blood—which means a relationship with the one willing to shed blood on your behalf, the one who shows you what really lasts.

Through him, the letter argues, we can be set in stone. Again, the irony is this argument about foundations comes in the letter that bears the name of the one called “Rock.” If anyone knows how difficult this is, it would be Peter. So, whether Peter wrote these letters or was the inspiration for them, there is a depth here that could only be lived experience.

“Through him you have come to trust in God” (1:21). Through him: Jesus came to introduce us to the God we thought we knew. And because Jesus said the Father and I are one, we began to realize, says Peter, that to trust in Jesus was to trust in God. And then God did this amazing thing we call Easter. And now we know, that to put our trust in Jesus, is to set our faith and hope deep in the rock that is God.

That’s important: faith set in God; not in our own ability to respond to God or in our own steadfastness, but in the consistency of God. It is important because without that understanding, the next imperative is impossible. This setting of faith and hope in God manifests in our lives as love. This relationship, this being embedded in the foundation of God, purifies your soul so that you can love.

Pay attention to how Peter describes the process. This isn’t love that you generate so that you can be a part of the foundation of God. We don’t love our way into relationship with God. If that were the case, none of us would ever get there. And none of us could love like we’re being called to love. It is beyond our abilities.

But because of the relationship that Jesus handed to us through his suffering, we can be purified enough to love. It is a response to, a result of the relationship with God, setting our faith and hope in God, that enables us to love. It is the outgrowth of that relationship.

That’s what being “of Easter” means. We are made new in the Resurrection and enabled to love like never before. “You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God” (1:23).

Pastor Barbara K. Lundblad tells this story: When I was growing up in Iowa, it was illegal to sell margarine. Well, not exactly. Stores could sell margarine, as long as it did not look like butter. My father was pleased about this, because we sold Grade B milk for making butter, and we surely did not want competition from something that pretended to be butter. Do any of you remember how margarine was sold? It came in a plastic bag and looked like a lump of white lard—except for one thing: there was a bright red-orange pellet of color in the middle of the bag. Even though my dad refused to have oleo in the house, my grandma dared to buy a package now and then. Sometimes, when I was staying with her, she let me squeeze the bag. I pressed my fingers into that bright red-

orange dot until it broke open inside the bag. Then, I kept squeezing and squeezing until that bright spot of color had turned the whole lump into beautiful, yellow almost-butter.

Could Easter be like that? The bright light of resurrection could not be contained in that place, any more than the stone could contain Jesus' body. The two disciples sitting at Emmaus felt the power of that light: "Were not our hearts burning within us while [Jesus] was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). That life-giving light did not stay in one place, but spread to Mary Magdalene and Thomas, to Cleopas and –well, we could put our own name in the blank Luke left unfilled. Fifty days later, the red-orange light of resurrection swept down like tongues of fire on women and men waiting in Jerusalem. The good news of resurrection spread like wildfire from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth.

Wherever the news traveled, communities began to gather around the story. This news was not private, but plural. Those who heard and believed the good news about Jesus were changed in profound ways. Whatever they had been before, they are now so different that the letter writer says they have been "born anew" (v. 23). Indeed, they are still so new that they have not quite learned how to walk. They are toddlers in the faith. Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, the writer of this letter opens the Scripture to them. No doubt, those new to the faith had lots of questions. How should we live now? What does it mean to be ransomed?

Some of them must have been slaves, a reality that becomes clear as the writer speaks directly to slaves later in this letter. As this portion of the letter builds to a close, we come to the most important question of all: how can we have "genuine mutual love" (v.22) for one another? The next several Sundays we will struggle to discern answers to these questions.

May we continue to be your Easter people, praising your name and witnessing to your love and care for us. May our Alleluias continue to ring out as we celebrate the Resurrection and your promise of eternal life. Amen and amen.

EASTER PEOPLE, RAISE YOUR VOICES (UMH #304)

Easter people, raise your voices, sounds of heaven in earth should ring.
Christ has brought us heaven's choices; heavenly music, let it ring.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Easter people, let us sing.
Fear of death can no more stop us from our pressing here below.
For our Lord empowered us to triumph over every foe.
Alleluia! Alleluia! On to victory now we go.
Every day to us is Easter, with its resurrection song.
When in trouble move the faster to our God who rights the wrong.
Alleluia! Alleluia! See the power of heavenly throngs.