

April 19, 2020 – the second Sunday of Easter

1 Peter 1:3-9 New International Version

Praise to God for a Living Hope

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31 New International Version

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Purpose of John's Gospel

30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

A Joyful Inheritance

As I was studying today's readings several things caught my attention. In the reading from I Peter, the writer reminds us we have a great inheritance. I know his reference is the Easter events, but I couldn't help thinking about inheritance in a larger sense. Early scripture refers to God's promises of land and offspring, and there are many references to monetary inheritance. One that quickly comes to mind is the story we often refer to as the Prodigal Son. But we can inherit more than monetary goods. Recently I've watched some of the program about "Genes" and the genetic gifts and anomalies we can inherit. But I also thought about the history we can inherit. This church has a rich history from your beginnings as the first Protestant church in the Salt Lake Valley and your role in nurturing other faith groups to make their home here too. I think about those early pioneers here in this valley whose faith carried them through many challenges – making a new home in a place that wasn't always hospitable.

Many kinds of inheritance such as property or money lack a kind of permanence. I think of a friend who had inherited a lovely old home on Cape Cod, a place where family had spent wonderful summers for generations, but not too long ago the family decided they could no longer keep up with maintenance and increasing taxes. It was a painful decision because there were so many memories but their inheritance had become a burden.

The writer of I Peter speaks of a different reality; believers are being gifted with an inheritance that is "imperishable, undefiled and unfading". How can that be? What could possibly be given that wouldn't decay or fade away? Even if life is full of challenges, we can hold on to faith in God who has resurrected Jesus and through God's great mercy that inheritance awaits those who have faith. That promised inheritance – one you may not see at the moment but you believe in it – it is your faith in God's salvation - a source of great joy.

The Gospel of John comes at this question of inheritance from a different angle, through the story of Thomas. We are told that the disciples have locked themselves away because of fear. What had happened to Jesus – the events around the crucifixion – were really terrifying. They knew Peter had been identified as he waited in the courtyard at Jesus' trial so were they identifiable too? But on the evening of that first day of resurrection Jesus came to them – a kind of reassurance that he was indeed resurrected – and those who were gathered were able to see his wounds and to affirm that it was indeed Jesus. Thomas wasn't present with the rest of them then. So when they told Thomas they had seen the Christ, he wanted the same kind of confirmation the rest of them had. In my youth this story was always told in a way that made it sound as if Thomas' doubting was an unfaithful act. But Jesus seemed to understand that Thomas just needed the same assurances the other disciples had, so when he came to the disciples this second time, he invited Thomas to touch – to feel the wounds. We

don't know if Thomas actually put his hands in those wounds but we do know that the assurance he received that this was indeed the risen Lord caused Thomas to declare, "My Lord and my God!"

I have long appreciated something the famous preacher Frederick Buechner said. He said 'doubts are the ants in the pants of faith'. I suspect most of us have doubts about any number of things. The real trouble with doubts is if you don't act to resolve them they can cause us to make wrong choices. And sometimes resolving doubts lead to great discoveries.

It's not just the corporal presence of Christ that is such a great affirmation for them. Jesus repeats the promise he made to them as they were gathered at the Last Supper. He said "Peace be with you, and he breathed on them – a reminder of the breath of creation – so they are now a new creation blessed with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel writer's intention is to explain these mysteries of the faith so that, as John later says, even those who weren't present for these events may believe. Jesus also commissions them – "as the Father has sent me, so I send you".

In these days when our world seems one of chaos and brokenness, it is life affirming to believe that God's goodwill is for the world's well-being. That image of Jesus breathing on them as an affirming, life-giving act is not one we would welcome in this time of COVID-19 but it is a powerful connection to God's work in creation as he breathed life into the world and promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us into that new future. Our inheritance is that life giving promise of God's love and presence with us. In this challenging time I urge you to look for signs of hope and new life in the world around you – new life beyond the obvious blooming of Spring – new life in the ways people are caring for one another in this time of social distancing.

Loving, Amazing Creator, we give you thanks for the glories of Spring and the green leafy newness of life.

- Thanks too for all who are finding ways to support others, especially those who are having difficulty with isolation and mental health concerns. Thanks for those working in assisted living facilities and care homes who are finding ways to reach out to residents while keeping them safe. For all who are showing gentleness, care and compassion to others.
- For creativity from teachers and others who are recognizing the special days and efforts of our children in novel ways
- For clearer skies allowing us to see vistas previously obscured.
- We also lift our prayers for all who are facing health challenges – those with COVID but also others who have to navigate a health care system often focused on other needs. For Lynne's daughter Jenn and all who minister to her with their medical skills.
- We lift prayers for researchers and all who are seeking understanding through tests and other means for an answer to the COVID virus
- For the Navaho Nation and the challenges they face with this pandemic and for all the inequities that have been revealed through this health crisis that we may have the will to address injustices
- For all who have suffered recent severe weather – for their losses of loved ones as

well as homes and businesses

- We pray for wisdom for our leaders and guidance for hard choices