

Easter 2 / April 16, 2023

1 Peter 1:8a

“Though you have not seen Him, you love Him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy inexpressible.”

What are your hopes? Hope is a fundamental quality of the human spirit. People endure the most desperate situations because they have hope for relief, release and a brighter future. Without hope the human spirit falls into despair. Austrian psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote that even if hope was unrealistic, based on nothing more substantial than dreams, it was essential to the survival of camp inmates. He realized that he had no hope of seeing his family members again. Nevertheless, he still hoped. That hope, even though obviously implausible, gave him strength to endure, until against all hope, he himself at least received release.

In terms of the human experience there is nothing more hopeless than death. Cures, healings and miracles are possible for the living. Sometimes, although very rarely, people with late-stage terminal illnesses experience spontaneous remission and return to good health. No one goes into spontaneous remission from death. In grief people either give into despair, or accept the hard reality and find the resilience to carry on with life. We bear the pain of grief and try to make it serve a positive purpose in our lives. From the perspective of this life, there is no point in hoping our loved ones will return to life. There is no hope in death!

Jesus' resurrection offers a different perspective and gives us reason for hope in our grief and in the face of our own eventual deaths. Against all human hope and worldly possibility, one man did return from death. One man returned, not as the result of diligent emergency resuscitation or because he was clinically dead and not really dead. One man returned, not because a prophet performed a miracle. Christ our Lord was three days in the tomb dead. He did not revive because He was not really dead. He arose, not because of the power of the prayers of holy people. The holy people had given up hope. He arose, because of the power of His indestructible life as the Son of God. He gives us hope, because in this He showed Himself our God and Saviour.

In our text Peter speaks not about hope in general, or hope as the world knows it. He speaks about the real and living hope we have through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Something so remarkable happened that we have a real and living hope in all things, even in the face of death. We have not seen Him with our eyes, but we see Him through faith. With eyes of faith enlightened by the Holy Spirit through the word of the gospel, the water of holy baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion, we see Him as our God and Saviour. In Him and through faith in Him, we have a real and living hope of sharing in His resurrection to a new and everlasting life. In this we rejoice with joy inexpressible!

Faith and sight are important aspects of our relationship with God in Christ. It is the human condition that we put them in the wrong order and want to see before we believe. In our gospel, Thomas refuses to believe until He sees Jesus raised from the dead. When He sees, he exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus asks, “Have you believed because you have seen me?” He says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” We are among those who have not seen and have believed. We believe because of the witness of the sacred scriptures; through their words, we see Jesus our Saviour raised from the dead.

In our text St. Peter blesses the believers dispersed throughout Asia Minor, because even though they have not seen Christ they both love Him and believe in Him. They love Him and believe in Him, despite the fact they have been grieved by various trials. Amazingly, instead of being weakened, their faith has been strengthened through these trials that tested them like fire. Not only have they maintained their faith in Christ, they rejoice with “joy that is inexpressible,” as they await the fulfilment of their faith in the salvation of their souls.

How is such a thing possible? What can instill such faith and give such hope? What makes it possible for us to believe in Christ, our God and Saviour raised from the dead? To some people such faith is ridiculous. They ask how anyone could believe something as implausible as a man returning from the dead? Personally, I think its even more implausible that a single celled creature spontaneously came into existence in a primordial ocean, replicated, multiplied and diversified into every living species on the face of the earth. Yet, many people believe that as if it was proven fact. As far as plausibility goes, it's a lot more likely that one Man rose from the dead than that the varied forms of life descended from a single celled creature, which isn't really a creature, because a creature implies a Creator and supposedly there was no Creator to create it. Which is more implausible? You be the judge.

There is worldly faith and there is Christian faith. Christian faith is more than believing that something implausible happened to Jesus. Faith is believing something even more unlikely than Christ rising from the dead. Faith is believing that God loves us, and cares for us in our sins and sorrows. Faith is believing God loved us so

much even when we were dead in our sins, hostile in our actions and attitudes that He sent His Son to become one with us and live with us in this world of pain, sorrow, sin and death.

How likely is something like that to happen in terms of human relations? How likely is it that a human being would love those who hate him or her to that extent? A fish would sprout arms and legs and crawl out of the sea before that happened. Yet this is what God did for us and every human soul in Christ Jesus. Implausible? But there is more. Faith is believing that God's Son loves us so much that not only did He take on Himself our form and nature, but He also took upon Himself our sins, died for our forgiveness and rose for our salvation. Because He did this, we have real hope in life and the promise of life beyond death. People believe many things, but God's love in Christ Jesus is the one thing worth believing!

People take many things on faith. Faith is blind when people don't know what they believe, or understand why they believe it. Christians have faith, but it isn't blind. God doesn't want us to close our eyes and believe. God opens our eyes so we may believe. Christians see Jesus in His words of forgiveness, encouragement and life. Christians see God's promise of forgiveness in the water of baptism, by which He daily, richly and freely washes away our sins and renews our lives in Christ. Christians see Christ's presence in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins; offered as a foretaste of the feast to come in His Father's kingdom.

Christians see Christ's presence in the trials, sorrows, griefs and sufferings of life, in the body of believers. Christians find strength and receive encouragement through the fellowship we share as members of Christ's body, the church on earth. Christians are given sight by the Holy Spirit through the scriptures. In them we see Jesus and believe in Him as our God and Saviour.

A Christian's self-understanding is based on understanding God's mind and His thoughts toward us, revealed by the Holy Spirit in the sacred scriptures. Through the witness of the Holy Spirit in the sacred scriptures, Christians understand they have spiritual needs that only God can meet. Christians know they are sinful beings, helpless in the face of temptation and living under the shadow of the condemnation of death. Christians see their needs and believe God provides us with forgiveness and life in Christ Jesus.

The Christian faith isn't blind, it sees Jesus in the words of scripture, the witness of the sacraments and the fellowship of believers. Our eyes have been opened to see the love of God in the face of Christ Jesus. Because we see Jesus, we receive relief in our sufferings, comfort in our sorrows, strength for daily living, resilience in our grief and a real and living hope of life in the face of death. Because we see Jesus, we rejoice with joy that is inexpressible.

The Holy Spirit enlighten our minds and open our eyes to see Jesus in the word, the sacraments and the fellowship of believers. The Holy Spirit open our hearts to believe, until our eyes are fully opened in our share of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In His' Name. Amen