

THE BEST IS YET TO COME
A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

1 Peter 1:3-9

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Have you ever had one of those days, weeks, years, when you felt overwhelmed by all the bad and sad things happening around you, perhaps to you? We don't have to look far to see the impact of tragic accidents, chronic and deadly diseases, cutting and degrading words, hurtful acts of anger and revenge. Sometimes the bad news just keeps adding up, and as it does, we might find ourselves feeling discouraged, helpless, sad and maybe even hopeless. Perhaps you can relate to some of the following reflections.

"Last year I hoped the Browns would make it to the playoffs. They didn't."

"I had hoped that new management and reorganization of the company would not mean the end of my job. My position was eliminated along with many others."

"After the accident, I had hoped my friend would walk again. She didn't."

"I hoped for a cure when my 6-yr-old nephew lay in the hospital suffering from a malignant brain tumor. He died."

"I had hoped that the people I care about most would always be a regular part of my life, but jobs end, people move, disagreements happen and unwanted changes were the result."

"I often hope for an end to hatred, revenge, school shootings, acts of terrorism and war. But then the headlines tell me there's another school shootings, a murder in the city, bombs dropped in the Middle East and innocent civilians killed, and awful acts of selfishness, cruelty, and violence occurring daily throughout the world."

If you can relate to such reflections, if you have ever felt like a patron saint of unfulfilled hopes, lost causes, and failed plans then perhaps you can relate to the first century Christians. Not only were bad things happening all around them, but awful things were directed right at them. They were facing daily hostility and persecution, and they were in danger of losing hope and giving up on their faith. Peter was concerned about them, and so he wrote down and sent words of bold encouragement, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you..."* (1 Peter 1:3-4).

The fact that Peter likely wrote today's passage shortly before his own martyrdom in A.D. 65 suggests that it is not only his response to suffering and despairing Christians, but it is also a declaration of his faith and ultimate hope. Peter wrote these words at a time when the Roman persecution of Christians had begun to make the initial Jewish persecution of Christians a mere footnote in the history books. Because Christians refused to worship Caesar at a time when such worship was not just popular but a sign of loyalty and required of everyone under Roman rule, the Roman government decided to single out Christians and label them as a threat to the state.

Because Christians were new to the scene and had what were considered to be strange new ideas about faith and life, it was easy to point a finger at them and blame them for the worries and problems of that day. It seems to me that a similar thing is happening today in our own country with fingers being pointed at immigrant and LGBTQ communities. If you know history, then you know that those in charge throughout the centuries have always been adept at not only scapegoating others but also coming up with cruel ways to persecute those they consider to be the problem. In the first century, it was the Roman Empire that was in charge and it was very well known for dealing harshly with those labeled as threats to the state.

In fact, the Romans of that day were cruel experts when it came to torture and death. We know this not only because Jesus and so many others suffered the horrible, excruciating death of crucifixion, but because history also reveals other horrible ways in which Romans tortured and killed anyone considered to be a threat. Besides crucifixion, Christians were regularly fed to lions, and some were set on fire like human torches. This persecution of Christians got significantly worse after Emperor Nero, who ruled from AD 54-68, blamed Christians for setting Rome on fire in AD 64. However, evidence from that day indicates that it was likely Nero himself who had Rome set ablaze so that he could clear space to build a massive new palace. Therefore, from AD 64-68, the persecution of Christians became severe which means it was an especially fearful time to be a follower of Jesus Christ. That severe persecution ended in AD 68 when Nero, who was deemed an enemy of the state by the Roman senate, committed suicide instead of being imprisoned and probably executed.

Like in the first century, life today is still precarious and even dangerous for those not willing to fall in line and conform, for those not willing to kneel before whoever happens to be the one in charge and calling the shots. It is a curious as well as sad commentary that some things can change so very much over the centuries, and yet other things remain so very much the same. The sad truth is that history is filled with powerful people scapegoating others to cover for their own sinfulness.

Peter wrote two letters to first century Christians during a time of horrific persecution, and yet what he wrote continues to bear truth for us today. In his letters, Peter acknowledged the difficult, dangerous realities of living a life of faith, but the real focus of his writing was to encourage Christians to remember Jesus, to identify with Jesus, and when necessary to even embrace suffering like Jesus did. The reason we do this as Jesus followers is not because we have a martyr complex and look forward to struggling and suffering, but because as Christians we know that the suffering of the cross is not the end of the story.

Those who believe in a resurrected Christ know that betrayal and despair, suffering and death are never the last words. Peter's words reminded those first-century Christians and they continue to remind us today that real hope, enduring hope lies in the resurrection of Jesus. No matter what happens in this life, Peter wants us to remember that Christ has won for us an inheritance in heaven that is "*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*" (1 Peter 1:4). Peter wants them and us to hold onto that hope. For despite all the awful and scary things that were

happening to those first century Christians, and despite all the awful, scary things that are happening in our world today and to us personally, Peter tells them and us not to lose hope because the best is yet to come.

Too often in our day, when Christians respond to difficult times with hope and talk of heaven, we are often accused of being "pie-in-the-sky" idealists or escapist who just refuse to deal with reality. But that's so far from what Peter is saying, and it is far from the example he set. Let's consider Peter for a few moments. In the Bible, the snapshot we have of Peter prior to Christ's resurrection is of an impulsive and sometimes irrational man – a man who lacked faith in troubled waters, who regularly misunderstood Jesus' teachings, who often put his foot in his mouth because he impulsively spoke before thinking, and who let down the Lord he loved more than once. While in the Garden of Gethsemane, he literally ran away; in the courtyard of the high priest, he denied he knew Jesus three times, and then he went into hiding both during and after Jesus' crucifixion.

It wasn't until after Jesus' Resurrection that we finally see Peter become a man who could face difficult and threatening challenges with enduring faith and courage. He faced his own martyrdom with conviction as well as the guts to ask to be crucified upside down because he didn't believe he was worthy to die the same way Jesus died. It was Jesus' resurrection that turned Peter the escapist into Peter the fearless proclaimer of the Gospel and eventually into Peter the martyred activist. It was this great hope in a Living Savior that gave Peter the faith and courage to confront, instead of running away from the unfair hardships and cruel persecution of his world. It was belief in a resurrected Christ that transformed Peter, and that faith and hope is what he shared with the faithful of his day as well as with those of us who continue to look to him and to read what he wrote so many centuries ago. It is our faith in a living Christ and our hope that what we see and experience in this life is not all there is to see and experience that makes all the difference in how we choose to live and in how we will die when that time comes.

There's a story that has made the rounds so it may be familiar to some of you. A woman diagnosed with cancer was given about three months to live, so she began making preparations which included contacting her pastor and discussing with him some of her last wishes including her funeral service. She gave him a couple of hymn suggestions as well as Scripture suggestions. The woman also told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order, and the pastor was preparing to leave when she suddenly remembered something else that was very important to her.

"There's one more thing," she said with excitement.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the woman, not quite sure what to say.

"That surprises you, doesn't it? The woman asked.

"Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending wedding receptions and other special dinners, my favorite part was when the dishes of the main course were being cleared away, and the server would lean over and say, 'you

can keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something really good and sweet was coming. It wasn't going to be Jell-O or pudding. It was going to be cake or pie; something with real substance; something you could eat with a fork. So, I want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: "Something better is coming, so keep your fork, too."

During the viewing time, people walked by the woman's casket; they saw the pretty dress she was wearing and her favorite Bible as well as the fork placed in her right hand. Over and over, the pastor heard the question, "What's with the fork?" And over and over, he just smiled. During his message, the pastor shared Jesus' words, "*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you. I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also*" (John 14:2-3). And then he told the people attending the woman's funeral of the conversation he had with her shortly before she died. He told them about the fork and about what it meant to her. And after he did so, he challenged them to think about how something even better is coming the next time they reach down and pick up a fork.

Through the Apostle Peter's words, the Risen Christ comes to us today, reassuring us that nothing in this life has the power to rob us of the heavenly inheritance that Christ has secured for us. Even at those times when our lives are caught up in pain and struggle, disappointment and sorrow, illness and death, let us never forget that because of Jesus Christ the best is yet to come!

Let us pray: Living Lord, too often we find ourselves caught up in life's frustrations, discouragements, and heartaches. In fact, sometimes we feel consumed and overwhelmed by the world's bad news, and at other times, our personal lives feel completely caught up in that which is difficult and painful. Lord Jesus, grant us a strength of faith that allows us to see beyond all the things that would rob us of hope. Infuse our lives with your Spirit that we may continually and in all circumstances of life bear witness to your resurrection and the belief that the best is yet to come. Amen.