SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Ours to Keep* 1 Peter 1:3-9

It is just a week since we have celebrated the most important holiday in the Christian year—the resurrection of Christ. Yes, Christmas is important, but Easter is the culmination, the climax toward which everything had been building. Easter is God’s assurance to the world, in every age, that God’s love and faithfulness is going to overcome hatred, corruption and death.

And on this second Sunday after the most important Sunday in the Christian calendar, we are gathered to listen to a portion of a letter attributed to, of all people, Peter! The apostle who denied he knew Jesus, and was one of his followers, just hours after Jesus had been arrested. Peter! Who was so afraid that he not only said he did not know Jesus, he said it *three* times!

Peter, yes, Peter.

After the resurrection of Christ, Peter—and the others—found their voice and their faith again, so much so, that they went on to found churches, and to guide and nurture other Christ followers even during times of hardship and danger.

That is what this letter is. It is a letter brimming with a powerful hope, and it was written to encourage the “exiles,” that is to say, the believers who were scattered across Asia Minor [1:1].

As people began to follow Christ and form themselves into churches, in many places, they began to find themselves at odds with their surrounding communities. From what scholars have been able to determine, at the time of this letter, many individuals in Christian communities were living with the threat of an official trial. However, there were also times and places where, rather than official persecution, the believers suffered a sense of general hostility toward them. (Later in this letter, the writer will make reference to the intimidation and maltreatment they suffered.)

It make me wonder which would be the most difficult to live with: the constant threat of being arrested on some kind of trumped-up charges by the local authorities, or not knowing if one (or all) of your neighbors were getting ready to turn you in for practicing a “minority religion,” one that did *not* believe in the emperor in Rome as a god, but in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ.

This is what the people to whom this letter was written were living with. They did not feel safe in their homes, or when they went out to work, or to the market to purchase food or other necessities.

The feeling of insecurity and intimidation was so great that many of the new Christians were considering withdrawing from the world, or going “underground” with their faith—meeting in secret while maintaining a public façade “respectability.” They were beginning to wonder if it was best to “go along” with the rest of the community and pretend to be like them. As one commentor wrote about them, they were wondering:

*Would it be safer to pretend we aren’t saved by grace through faith? Should we act as though we weren’t asked to pray for our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because it’s risky and darned hard? … “Should our faith move inside: inside our heads, inside our hearts”” Should it be a personal faith that keeps us safe and warm where it really matters in the imaginations of our inner life?*

In other words: should keep ourselves safe by denying Christ? This is what the letter is addressing, and who *better* to respond to these questions but Peter? Who else understands their fear better than he did?

I should mention that the letter is dated (as best as it can be) to about a year before Peter’s own crucifixion in Rome, and that it is doubtful that Peter wrote it himself. However, from what we know of Peter’s life *after* his first failure as a disciple, we know that he went on to live a life of courageous witness and faithfulness. We know that he accepted the love and forgiveness of Christ and went on to live a life in the spirit of the goodness and mercy that he was given.

So, if he did not write it with his own hands, he did most certainly write it with his whole life, and this is what is conveyed in this letter to the Christians who were anxious and suffering the way he had—the way all of us do at some point in our lives.

And that is why we still read and reflect on this letter because despite the fact that it was not written *to* us here in our century and our location, we can be assured that it was written *for* us and for other believers in every age, in every location.

It was written to people like us who need the reminder that what we have been given by Christ is ours, truly ours, and can never be taken from us. In the passage we heard, Peter writes that it is our *“inheritance that”* [1:4] will never decay, or be ruined, or disappear.

Indeed, later in the letter, the writer assures the recipients of their blessing in Christ [3:14] and reminds them of their glorified status as a *“chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”* [2:9] and he draws what one writer had described as “a boundary of mercy around them,” telling them: *“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”* [2:10]

The first people to receive this encouragement continued to live their faith openly, even courageously. In every age since those first recipients of this letter, people have found the inspiration they needed to hold on to the love of God, the faithfulness of Christ, and the constant companionship and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

They have continued to care for each other, but also for the poor and the broken among them, whether or not they were believers. They continued to build places of worship and send missionaries out into the world to tell the story—the holy story—of Christ and his love and compassion for all people. They continued to pray for their enemies—even when it was so very hard to do so.

Of course, for many centuries now, we have *not* been a minority religion. In the western world, we have been the dominant religion. And even though there is a greater diversity of religious thought and practice; even though the church does not occupy the same lofty position in society it once did, we must admit we do not face the same insecurities that the first recipients of this letter did. By contrast, we are safe and secure. To put it in the language of the letter, our “inheritance” is safe. It will not be taken from us.

The question becomes: what prevents us from “spending” it now, ourselves? That is what most people do with an inheritance. They spend it on things they may have wanted but could not afford to acquire on their own.

So, if it is ours to keep, then it is also ours to spend, isn’t it?

To put it another way: this inheritance has been saved for us so that we will always be confident and ready and unafraid to spend it on the things that matter. It was nurtured and increased and given to us so that we may never feel at a loss to also be courageously faithful in the world we live in, and among the people that surround us.

Our inheritance was saved for us that we might also identify those situations and those people who are in need of our faithfulness in our time and our place. We are blessed with a heritage and an inheritance that supports our willingness to be bold and very public in our support of people in circumstances of danger, need, and oppression.

I will not list the number of times and places this congregation has already spent itself in addressing such needs and dangers and oppression here in our own community. You all know them even better than I do.

What I will say is that our inheritance is still secure. We still have reserves of faith and courage. It is in all of the history of the ministries in which we have been and are engaged, and the way that history can and should inspire us. Indeed, the history of our ancestors in the faith is our launching pad to which we may continue to return as we look out into the community and into the world to see God’s people. Because of them, without flinching or turning away, we may also see how God is calling us to respond.

Our inheritance, not earned by the sweat of our brows, but by the resurrection of Jesus Christ is ours, and nothing can diminish it, nothing can snatch it out of our grasp.

Our inheritance you see is love—just that. Love that started with Jesus, the one Peter turned his back on, but who never turned his back on Peter. Or as one writer described it: “Love of God who loves so deeply it shakes you to the core. Love so profound we are remade. Made alive. Call it salvation; that’s the only word that fits. We are being saved by his love; saved to love as he loves. Saved to live as he lived.”

On this second Sunday of Easter, let us receive the words of a failed disciple who found his faith, and offers us his hand. Friends, let us rejoice in what we have been given, and then turn with hope and eagerness toward the future where we may share our inheritance with all in need, with all who will hope and work with us.

Let it be so. Amen.