

April 23, 2017, 2nd Sunday of Easter

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Focus: Jesus brings us through trials.

This week I've had the subject of testing on my mind. I suppose it's because Nikki is taking her final two ordination exams this weekend. Local schools have been taking the ISTEP. And I also know that Hanover College students took their spring term exams this past week. There are some people who maybe like testing, but most of us don't. It's not fun. It's high stress. Things like our mood—probably not great during a test—or how much sleep we got the night before—probably not as much as usual—can affect how we do. There's a lot of pressure. Chances are, whatever we do now, we've all had that experience taking a test at one time or another, whether it's in grade school, in college, postgrad, a driving test, or even a vision test at the eye doctor.

Today, I want to talk about the testing of our faith. The next few weeks during this season of Easter, I will be preaching on our second reading, which will come from 1 Peter. Our reading today starts out “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.” Before he even gets started, he wants to remind everyone who hears this letter of two things:

One, God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Simple enough. Two, there's a connection because in a way God has become our Father, too. How's that? Through the new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

In other words, we have been born again! Born again as children of God. Now if you talk to people of other faith traditions, “born again” is a term with a very specific meaning. It's a term for what happens in that moment you know that you have been saved. It's similar to how 1 Peter means it and how we mean it, except we look at it a little differently. The moment that we were given the new birth of a living hope was not anything that happened in our lifetime. It was the moment we celebrated last week, Easter Sunday, when Christ rose from the dead. That hope is alive not because of any special religious moment in our own lives, as helpful as those can be, but because the cross and the tomb could not keep Jesus dead. Our hope is alive because he is alive.

That new birth for us takes place in baptism. In baptism, we die with Jesus on the cross. Gone is the old Adam inside of us, the old sinner, nailed to the cross, drowned in the water, however you want to say it, the death sentence has been pronounced, its days are numbered, and the promise is that it will someday be gone completely. So baptism is the death of sin and the death of death. But it's also a new birth. A new birth because in baptism, we hear the same words that were said to God's first Son Jesus “you are my son [or daughter] in whom I am well-pleased.” In baptism, we are born again to the life of Jesus which means a new and living hope of resurrection.

And you hear this, and you want to say: “Alleluia!” You want to ring all the noisemakers like last week. And maybe, just maybe, on special days like Easter, or when you're home with your family, or when you've spent all day doing something good like helping at the food pantry, or when you sang the right hymns and heard a good sermon—just maybe it really feels like the old

sinner is dead and that new resurrected Christian is born. Maybe in those moments you rejoice because, as 1 Peter says, “you have received the outcome of your faith.”

And then you step out the door. Or the phone rings. Or you turn on the TV or log onto Facebook. Or you’re still humming “Thine is the Glory, risen conqu’ring Son,” and you turn onto 62, and immediately someone cuts you off. And WHAM! that old sinner that we thought we had nailed to the tree, that we thought we had drowned, well...Alleluia! He or she is risen indeed!

Folks, you know better than I do that not every day is Easter Sunday. We have been given a new birth, yes. We have been given a new birth in our baptism. No one can take that new birth away from us. But a new birth of what? A new birth into a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. A hope, not something that’s already here.

This epistle of 1 Peter contains wisdom. Because it’s written to people decades after the resurrection, people living far away from Jerusalem, far away from Galilee, too, who almost certainly did not see the risen Christ with their own eyes, and I think we can assume many of them were not even born at the time. And worse than that, they are people who are facing persecution. They are people who, if not killed outright—and some Christians were—they are at least discriminated against. They have to deal with being denied jobs because they’re Christians or being publicly shamed or being uninvited to the best social scenes. They have received their new birth as children of God. But right now it doesn’t seem so great. 1 Peter doesn’t sugarcoat it, “for a little while, you have had to suffer various trials.”

The people to whom this letter is written are facing testing. I’ll say it again: we don’t like to talk about testing. Least of all religious testing. There are still parts of the world where Christian persecution is very real. I preached on Good Friday about the bombings at the Coptic churches in Egypt. Closer to home, you may remember the story of Dylan Roof who walked into Mother Emanuel in Charleston, SC and killed 9. We need to pray for them. We need to think of them when we pray, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” We need to remember Christians facing the ultimate test when we pray the Lord’s Prayer a few minutes from now.

But we also need to look at our own lives. Because while, God-willing, we may not face the test of martyrdom, we will all be tested. The world out there is waiting, and it’s not Easter Sunday. The darkness that sometimes comes over our own hearts—our own sin—is waiting inside of us, and it’s not Easter Sunday there either.

We are going to receive tests. Sometimes tests are obvious in their evil: death, illness, addiction, loss of job, depression, loneliness. We turn to God, and we ask, “Why could you let this happen to me? What did I do wrong? God, where are you?” During times of testing, it can be tempting to give up or to feel like God has given up on us.

Tests seem evil. We want a Christianity without tests. We want the resurrection without the cross. But sometimes it is in those tests that we find our faith.

When I think back to the tests I took in school, what I realize is that I never learned better than when I was being tested. It wasn’t fun at the time. If you asked me, I wouldn’t want to do it again, but in that testing, a couple things happened. First, you have to be all in. It’s easy to be passive when you’re just sitting through a lecture or a sermon. But when you’re being tested,

you have to be fully invested. Because of that, I learned what I needed to know about the material. And what I want to say is through our own life's tests, we learn what we need to know about Christ. We learn that Jesus is someone we can call on in times of needs. We learn about suffering and the cross. We learn what it means to hope in what we can't see. When everything feels like it's spiraling away from us, we learn what it means to trust.

So think back to when you have been tested in faith. Maybe some of you are going through tests right now. And yet you are all here. No matter how bad it was, even if it seemed like you were walking through hell, even if like Thomas, you are struggling to believe in the Good News, **you are here**. Think about it. That is amazing. It's easy to be faithful when all is going well. It's easy to be an Easter Sunday Christian. But to return and sing "Alleluia!" to Jesus after you've come through the test, that's hard. But it is so powerful. It's resurrection after the tomb. It's new birth after life. It is a living hope born on the cross.

Jesus Christ doesn't promise us that when we are baptized, it will be an end to the tests. Far from it. To be born with him is to be born with the one whose entire life was a test. But it's to be with one who has come out the other side. Whose love for us was tested and proved in places like the wilderness with Satan, like the skull and like the cross and the tomb.

In baptism, we too enter those places. We enter the dark tombs of the world and of our lives, but not as people who are lost, but as Christians pregnant with a living hope. We enter with a living hope because we know that it's often in those places of death where the crucified one is most intimately revealed to us. He is fully revealed and found trustworthy because when we despair of everything else and we realize we can't make it through this world alone, we have nothing left but him. And he becomes everything to us. That's not a blind hope or a desperate hope, but a living hope. As we come through trials and afflictions and tests and yes, even the cross, our living hope will be strengthened and purified as we learn to trust in God come what may. A living hope because in the end Christ always comes out of the tomb, and we shall, too. **Amen.**