



Easter 2A

April 13, 2020

The Lectionary Gospel —

John 20:19–31

Author: Scott Hoezee

Locked inside because of fear. Sound familiar to anyone? Well, alas, yes it does just now. We will loop back to this COVID-19 related thought below but first let's look at the disciple at the center of this post-Easter story.

Poor Thomas. He is the classic example of the old saying, "Make just **one** little mistake and you're labeled for life!" Or in Thomas's case, labeled for something more like *forever*! But honestly, would any of us be so different were we faced with what Thomas confronted? Probably not. We'd be skeptical too. After all, his fellow disciples were not asking Thomas to embrace some commonplace. We're talking about the history-shattering truth of the resurrection here! It is supposed to be an amazing, unique, and (just so) a hard thing to believe.

So let's stop pigeon-holing poor Thomas with the adjective "Doubting" for saying exactly what we'd all say if someone came up to us three days after a loved one's funeral to say they'd run into the once-dead person at the supermarket. Not one of us would say, "That's wonderful! Thanks for telling me!" No, we'd say "Right! I'll believe that one when I see it! (And by the way, are you feeling alright?)"

Thomas did too and it is wholly understandable. The notion that a dead man was back alive again was not exactly something you grabbed hold of and easily believed in a minute or two. So Thomas plays it safe but also then speculates aloud as to what it might take for him to believe this after all. As he talks, his rhetoric gets more and more exaggerated. "My friends, I'd have to see with my own eyes the nail holes in his hands. No, tell you what, I'd need to *touch* those holes with my own finger.

Better yet, I'd want to stick *my whole hand* right into his side where the sword pierced him!" You can almost imagine Thomas's smirk of incredulity getting a little wider with each rhetorical flourish.

Thomas kept mounting up an ever-larger heap of evidence that he thought he'd need to believe.

Of course, once he does meet Jesus, all that evaporates. To paraphrase a traditional aphorism, if you

don't have faith, then there will never be evidence enough to convince you and if you do have faith, no evidence is needed. *Without faith, no evidence is sufficient; with faith, no evidence is necessary.*

And although most of us probably agree with that in principle, we can perhaps admit that sometimes we are still hungry for a little evidence, or a little *more* evidence than we usually have. Thomas ended up with the advantage of an ample helping of both. Lucky him. Er, blessed him.

Jesus himself knows that faith is both a blessing and a miracle. That's why he says in verse 29 that while it was one thing for Thomas to believe with Jesus standing right in front of him, it would one day be quite another thing to believe without such undeniable physical proof standing in the same room.

But John at least seems confident that he has given us enough for just such faith to be born. That's why he immediately follows this comment by Jesus with his own commentary in which he says, "Now listen, friends: I have left out a ton. Jesus said and did lots of other really amazing things that I just have not gotten around to even mentioning. But what I have given you is enough. Read it and believe!"

Now I don't know about you, but when I read how much John left out, there is a part of me that wants to cry, "Tell me!" It's rather like narrating a story to a little child. You know what happens the moment you say something like, "I've left out some of the best parts but I'm not going to tell you all that now!"

The child's reaction is predictably along the lines of, "Awww, come on! Don't leave me hanging in suspense!"

There was so much more to say but John seems convinced that he had said and written enough.

And by the Holy Spirit who guided John's pen, we believe that he's right about that. If John could know how many millions of people over the centuries have come to faith, or had their faith strengthened, by what he wrote in this gospel, wouldn't it most certainly reduce him to tears? Could he have had any idea how great an effect his carefully crafted account of Jesus would finally have?

Of course if we preach on this text the Sunday after Easter in the midst of COVID-19 isolation, we do so once again via Zoom or other such virtual platforms. Just now we not only cannot grasp *Jesus'* nail-pierced hands, we cannot shake **anyone's** hand. We pastors cannot even grasp the hand of the suffering and the sorrowing. People are dying alone in ICUs without even family allowed close by.

If ever we were in a moment of doubt, of wanting to see some evidences that God is near, is in control, that a better day may come by God's grace . . . well, this is such a moment. We may feel a bit less like Thomas and a bit more like that father in another Bible story who cried out to Jesus, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" Because we have some very good questions for God just now. And let's not pretend we pastors or anyone else have easy answers. We are as caught up in this pandemic as anyone to whom we minister.

All we can do with spiritual integrity is to direct God's people to God's Word, to what John wrote, to the witness he bore long ago and to the witness that, by the Spirit, John bears this day still.

I find it curious that in both of the Sunday encounters we read in this passage of John 20, both times the disciples are hiding out in a locked room. On the first week we are even overtly told they locked the doors out of fear. For some weird reason, the outer world did not transform in an instant just

because Jesus had been raised from the dead. There were still things to fear. The Jesus who told the disciples six chapters earlier “Let not your hearts be troubled” encounters still-troubled hearts in this chapter, Easter’s reality or no.

We are troubled too. We are locked up in our houses out of fear of a virus we cannot see but that stalks us. So maybe there is Good News in this story that Jesus pops into locked rooms of fear. That he presents evidence—somehow, some way—of the Life he has to give. That he gives us a servant like John to tell us the story that we may believe. And this year perhaps that is enough. “My Lord and my God!” Yes, Lord God, stay close.

Textual Points:

As everyone knows, John 20:30-31 looks powerfully like the end of the gospel. Jesus’ ministry is summarized, John admits he’s written down only a portion of what all Jesus said and did, and then gives the purpose statement for the whole gospel: “But these things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ of God and that by believing, you may have life in his name.” You can almost see the words “The End” following that verse. Fade to black. Roll the credits.

But then comes the surprise: another entire chapter with a homely story on a beach. Jesus cooks breakfast for his friends, re-commissions Peter despite his recent failing, and then John again concludes the narrative in almost word-for-word replication of the conclusion of John 20 but this time, in John 21:25, he reaches for a hyperbole to indicate that not only did he not write everything down that Jesus said and did (a point he’d already granted at the end of chapter 20) but that as a matter of fact, IF anyone even could write them all down, the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.

This double-ending of John seems strange. It’s almost as though John finds it hard to ring down the curtain on his gospel. He knows it has to end and yet . . . and yet maybe not just yet. One more story. And then when that one final narrative snippet gets written down, he knows he has to quit and so says in essence, “I’m really going to quit this time but it’s not the end of the story. In fact, the story has no end. I have to quit writing and you have to quit reading but in truth, the world isn’t big enough for this story.” It seems to be John’s way of reminding us that when he quits writing and we quit reading, what remains is for us to go out into all the world to tell of the Christ who, though for a while he was in the world, was actually bigger than the world, too. And THAT is something to talk about every day forever and ever!

Illustration Ideas:

One of the most difficult disciplines that film actors need to learn is to resist the temptation to look directly at the camera. Actors need to pretend like the camera is not even there because if for even a second or two they glance into that lens, viewers see it immediately. In fact, if you’ve ever watched amateur video productions, then you know that one of the main things that distinguishes amateur work from professional films is that you can often spy one of the people in the scene cutting their eyes in the direction of the camera. It’s hard to resist! But it’s a problem because when it happens, it breaks the magic spell that films try to cast—it breaks down what in theater they call “the fourth wall”

which is the one that exists between the stage and the audience.

Viewers need to suspend the awareness that this is just play acting so as to get immersed in the movie or the play as though it were really happening. But the second some actor becomes obviously aware of the camera, the viewer is aware of it too and the gig is up. I have been interviewed for a couple of mini-documentaries and the rule is the same. To help, the person who interviewed me stood just to the left of the camera and insisted I maintain eye contact with him so I would not start cutting my eyes in the direction of the camera lens.

Occasionally, of course, having an actor intentionally look at the camera is done for humorous effect.

It becomes like an inside joke between the actor and the audience. (As in this clip from the movie *Trading Places* when Eddie Murphy's character is being condescended to so badly that he looks square at the camera as if to say to the viewers of the movie, "Oh puh-leeze!")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emvySA1-3t8>)

In general, though, not looking into the camera remains a thespian rule of thumb.

If you read Matthew, Mark, and Luke, then you know that these three evangelists also avoid, as it were, "looking into the camera." They tell the story of Jesus straight out but without addressing their reading audiences directly. John, however, is different. Throughout his gospel John keeps stepping out of the scene to talk to us directly as readers. As you read various stories, it's almost as though John stops the narrative now and again to whisper into your ear, "Now, remember, when Jesus first said this to us, we didn't get it. It was only years later that we figured it out. OK, now back to our story!"

But nowhere is this as clearly evident as at the end of John 20 when we readers take center stage as John turns directly toward us. He even uses the second person pronoun: "This is written so that *you* may believe." You can almost see John's finger pointed in your direction.

But then . . . what John is writing is no piece of fiction, no novel or play or short story. It is the truth. And it is a truth that comes straight at every one of us!



Old Testament Lectionary —

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Author: Stan Mast

For those who follow the RCL, Easter is not just a one off event. The RCL devotes 7 Sundays to the Easter season, so that the church has ample opportunity to reflect on the most earthshaking event in

history. As a relative newcomer to the Lectionary, I think that is a superb idea. But it does present the average preacher with quite a challenge. What can you say about Easter that hasn't already been said on Easter Sunday?

The RCL is very helpful here, as it takes us through Acts where the effects of Easter are played out on the stage of history, particularly the history of the church. For the next 3 Sundays, for example, we will focus on the first Christian sermon, preached on Pentecost by Peter, as reported in Acts 2. That chapter shows us the centrality of Christ's resurrection to the Gospel, the stunning response to the preaching of the resurrection gospel, and the remarkable community created by that gospel.

Any student of preaching should pay careful attention to Peter's sermon; it is a model of gospel preaching. First, it begins as a direct response to a crisis, addressing a felt need in its audience—confusion about the phenomena associated with Pentecost. In other words, it begins by hooking into its audience with a felt need.

Second, it is completely Christ centered. While God is clearly the actor here, God is active precisely in Jesus, particularly in his miracles, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his enthronement. The main focus is on Christ's resurrection.

Third, it preaches Christ with a heavy reliance on Scripture, particularly Old Testament prophecy. But it also has a very personal dimension, as Peter claims to be a witness of that resurrection. Fourth, it comes to a thunderous climax with a summary sentence that stuns the hearers and cuts their hearts open.

Fifth, it doesn't stop until Peter tells his audience exactly what they must do with the news they've just heard. The sermon has a clear application of the Gospel. "What must we do? Repent and be baptized." Finally, by the power of the Holy Spirit, three thousand people were converted and baptized as a result of this sermon. Now that was a sermon!

The question is, how do we preach on someone else's sermon? Where do we connect with people on this second Sunday of Easter? Well, here at Calvin Theological Seminary, we teach Paul Scott Wilson's [The Four Pages of the Sermon](#), which encourages preachers to look for trouble and grace in the text and then relate that to trouble and grace in the world. So, where is the trouble in the text? What's the problem to which Peter speaks?

I see two problems, both of them having to do with confusion. First, there was confusion about the church. Who were these people who could speak in many languages, even though they were clearly hicks from up north in Galilee? How can we explain what we see and hear in this bunch of preachers? "What does this mean?" "They have had too much to drink!" The first part of Peter's sermon (verses 14-21) speaks to that confusion about the church, a confusion that is very much a part of the world today. The RCL leaves out that section of Acts, so we will, too, for now.

The second confusion is not voiced by the crowd, but Peter is obviously attuned to it, because his whole sermon addresses it. The crowd was confused about Jesus. They thought they knew who he was, but Peter knows they were disastrously wrong. The trouble in the text is that these people don't

know who Jesus really was. Our world is troubled in the same way. So we can preach on Peter's sermon as the definitive way of addressing that confusion about Jesus.

The first part of Peter's sermon ends with a quote from Joel 2. "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (verse 21)." The rest of Peter's sermon is an explanation of who that "Lord" is. This Jewish audience assumed it was Yahweh, their covenant Lord, and they were right. What they didn't know was that Yahweh had proclaimed Jesus both Lord and Christ, which is exactly how Peter ended his sermon in verse 36. In between that introduction and that conclusion, Peter sets out to prove who Jesus is.

As any good preacher would do, Peter begins where his audience is, with what they already know about Jesus. "Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know." Even the hostile Jewish authorities had to acknowledge that (recall the words of Nicodemus in John 3:2), though as their hostility grew they began to attribute his miracles to the Devil. But the vast majority of his countrymen and women admitted that Jesus was a miracle working prophet, or at least a teacher.

But that's all he was, just a man accredited by God through his miracles. The problem was that Jesus didn't leave it at that. He went on to claim that he was much more than a mere man, a claim that Thomas voiced so clearly after Jesus resurrection, "My Lord and my God." That dual claim was why he died an accursed death as a blasphemer and traitor.

Peter's explanation of Jesus' crucifixion is rife with difficulties, but it is crucial in his preaching of Jesus as the Christ. The first difficulty jumps out at us in these words: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge...." Quite apart from the whole issue of predestination which these words raise, they clearly teach that the death of Jesus was not some accident of history. It was part of God's plan, what God had intended all along, as evidenced by all the prophecies about the suffering servant.

But God didn't do it. It was a divine necessity, but it was also a human conspiracy. Yes, the death of Christ was at the heart of God's saving purpose for the world, but God didn't kill Jesus. The Jewish leaders and their followers aided by the Gentile authorities did; "you with the help of wicked men put him to death."

There's the second problem with Peter's explanation of Jesus crucifixion. It has led to centuries of anti-Semitism that have grown like a weed out of Peter's words. The Jewish people are "Christ killers," so they deserve to be killed or at least treated with contempt.

As we preach on this text, we must take great care to point out that Peter was not talking about the Jewish people as a whole, but about a certain set of leaders and followers at a particular place and point in time. "You" meant the three thousand plus Jews who listened to Peter, and then became charter members of the Christian church.

Here is Peter's point in this first part of his sermon about Jesus. The man who had been accredited by God through his miracles was killed as a man accursed by God because of his blasphemy against

God and his treason against Rome.

But now, says Peter in verse 24, God has accredited Jesus again, proving that Jesus claims were precisely true. “But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” This is the central Christian claim about Jesus of Nazareth. God raised him from the dead. You can almost hear Peter’s audience gasp and then begin to object that it wasn’t true, that it couldn’t have happened.

That’s when Peter pulls out his Old Testament to prove that it was impossible for death to keep its hold on the crucified Jesus—because the Bible says so! Quoting from Psalm 16, Peter puts David’s words in Jesus’ mouth: “my body also will live in hope because you will not abandon me to the grave nor will you let your Holy One see decay....” Peter proves that David could not have been talking about himself there, because “David died and was buried and his tomb is here to this day.” No, David was speaking as a prophet about Jesus.

Then Peter elicits more biblical proof that Jesus death and resurrection were part of God’s long term plan. David knew God had promised that one of his descendants would sit on the throne of David in perpetuity (II Samuel 7:12), a promise that sustained Israel through the troubled times of its history). Prophetically seeing what lay ahead for his nation and his immediate descendants, David spoke about the resurrection of the Christ in Psalm 16. So, says Peter, we have biblical proof that the Christ would die and rise again, as I’ve just told you Jesus did.

Peter will quote more Scripture to make his case about Jesus Christ (verses 33-35, which lead to the stunning climax in verse 36), but the RCL inexplicably leaves those verse out of our reading for today. Verse 32 adds one more crucial bit of evidence to prove that Jesus rose from the dead. Not only did the Old Testament clearly teach it, but we have also actually seen it. “God raised this (prophesied) Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact.”

Pointing to his companions, the Eleven apostles standing beside him and perhaps the one hundred plus who crowded around them, Peter claims multiple witnesses—not just one or two deluded fools, but we, all of us, are witness of the fact. Interesting choice of words, isn’t it? The resurrection of Jesus is “the fact.” That’s exactly what it is, The Fact, the central fact of the Christian faith, the fact that proves Jesus’s claims, the fact that gave new hope to discouraged disciples, the fact that moved thousands and then millions to repent and be baptized into the church, the fact that inaugurated a new age in history, the fact at the heart of history. By this fact, the man Jesus who had been discredited as a blasphemer and traitor has been re-accredited by God as Lord and Christ.

“Who do people say I am?” That was Jesus’ question of his disciples. It’s a question that reverberates through history. It never grows old. It needs to be answered. On this second Sunday of Easter, Peter’s old sermon gives us the perfect opportunity to answer that question for a whole new generation of confused people.

Illustration Idea

What counts as proof? Peter offers two kinds of proof about Christ’s resurrection in his sermon—

Scripture and experience, or what we might more philosophically call revelation and reason, some word from God and some thinking about human experience.

In my Seminary days, logical positivism had a death grip on philosophy. It taught that the only meaningful claims were those that could be proven by observation and experimentation. Only if you could see it and test it was it true. A supposedly authoritative word from beyond or above was completely unverifiable, so revelation had no role in establishing the truth of a statement. Logical positivism lost its iron grip on philosophy when it was demonstrated that its claim about the verification principle was itself unprovable by observation and experimentation.

Both revelation and reason/experience can help establish the truth of the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, but in the end only the Holy Spirit can cut open a heart and implant the seed of faith.



The Lectionary Psalms —

Psalm 16

Author: Scott Hoezee

Probably we misread Psalm 16, or at least its most famous verses about how our bodies will rest secure. We have all been to our share of funerals that lift out verses 9-11 and put a resurrection spin on them. And maybe as Christians exegeting the Old Testament there is something right about that. All biblical authors told more than they knew. That is one of the things the Holy Spirit does when inspiring divine Scripture. So the idea that Psalm 16 points beyond itself all the way to the post-Easter reality in which Christians live is not far-fetched or wrong.

Still, let's at least be clear that this Hebrew poet was not talking about life beyond the grave exactly the way most Christians think about such matters. When he says his body will rest secure, it is more likely he means he will sleep well. What he wants here is not a resurrected life beyond the grave but to avoid the grave for as long as possible, preferably forever if that were possible.

We too easily read backwards onto the Old Testament ideas about what happens to us when we die —most of our ideas would actually have been foreign to ancient Israelites. They believed that all people—the moral, the immoral, the indifferent—went to a not-so-pleasant post-mortem holding tank called Sheol, “the realm of the dead” as referred to in verse 10. To be clear, going to Sheol was a source of dread for even the most devout of Israelites. And it is going *there* that this psalmist is asking God to stave off for him by sparing his life from whatever threatening enemies he was facing when he penned this poem.

So when we read this as meaning, “I will die but I will be just fine because I will go to be with the Lord in delight and felicity, even prior to the resurrection of my body at the last day,” then we are not getting the original meaning of Psalm 16. Not even close. But what about “eternal pleasures” and being at God’s right hand forevermore? That sure sounds like a post-mortem hope that resonates with our Easter hope in Jesus, doesn’t it? Well, yes, and again: this poet pointed (by the Spirit) to more than he knew or was aware of. Even so, it may be that precisely how this psalmist would have filled in the details on what he meant would look quite different to us as Christians today.

So let’s proclaim the resurrection on this Sunday after Easter through Psalm 16 but let’s do so noting how our hopes for eternal life have changed over time. The truth is—and it is a wonderful truth if you approach it the right way—the ancient Israelites could not quite have conceived of how God would ultimately pull off salvation. But their wonderment at what we now know from reading the Gospel can become our renewed wonderment if we can see the Good News through fresh (or refreshed) eyes.

Is it possible that we have at times become too sangfroid about even the Gospel? Do we think that what God would end up doing through Jesus Christ had been fairly obvious all along? Because it wasn’t. It was an utter surprise. It remains a surprise. It remains what C.S. Lewis and others have called very simply “The Grand Miracle.” What an utter surprise that the God to whom we cry for help (even as the poet of Psalm 16 does) became a human zygote in the womb of a woman. What an utter surprise that he grew up mostly in obscurity until very late in his life when he finally lit out on a rabbinic ministry that few people understood at the time and that got him crossed out by the Romans before it was all over (and with some of God’s own people pulling the strings behind the scenes).

The Son of God got made flesh, and the world murdered that flesh. *And this was not an accident. This was part of the plan. This WAS the plan.* Because through that death God did an end run on death. In these COVID-19 days of crisis, a lot of us are thinking a lot more about vaccines than usual—indeed, we’d all get in line tomorrow if a coronavirus vaccine became available. But as Neal Plantinga once pointed out, in John 3 in his conversation with Nicodemus when Jesus compared what the Son of Man would do to what happened when Moses cured snakebites by lifting up the image of a serpent on a pole, it was kind of a spiritual vaccine to which Jesus was pointing. Like cures like. We defeat diseases by infecting ourselves with a tiny or inert amount of that very disease so our bodies can build the army of antibodies to attack it in the future.

So in the Gospel: the surprise of the crucifixion and resurrection is that death cures death. Christ’s death inoculates us from eternal death. The very thing the poet of Psalm 16 was in dread of—going down to the grave—somehow became the portal to that everlasting life of delight at God’s right hand that the psalmist desired.

The poet of Psalm 16 would find that to be utterly amazing, a newer thought than he could have ever imagined encountering.

It ought to be no different for us.

Illustration Idea

If you want to see the clear Christian “spin” put on part of Psalm 16, you can go to Google Images and check out “[Psalm 16 headstones](#)” to see quite the sampling. I did not want to put any of those pictures on this post because most contain the names of real people and I did not want to risk seeming to exploit a loved one’s grave as illustrative material. But clearly the presence of this psalm on grave markers is a witness to the resurrection of the body promised in Christ. As noted above on this sermon starter, that is a fine thing to do, even if it is quite at variance with anything the actual psalmist had in mind!



Lectionary Epistle —

1 Peter 1:3–9

Author: Doug Bratt

When my wife and I drew up our first will after our oldest son was born, we didn’t have many material assets. So our will mostly addressed who would care for our children if we predeceased them.

We later revised our will to include instructions about who will inherit what when we die. Yet, candidly, there’s still not much to inherit. We don’t own a home. No one will become independently wealthy if they cash in our life insurance policies.

In fact, a financial planner told my wife and me that we really needed to “put the pedal to the metal” in order to provide for our long-term financial security. As a result, we have made and continue to make some investments.

But financial investments are always risky. Some that have the highest potential for earnings also carry the highest risk for loss. Relatively low-risk investments may not yield especially high dividends.

So wise investors always ask themselves if they can afford to lose some if not all of what they invest. In other words, we ask ourselves just how secure we need our investments to be. However, security seems to be in fairly short supply right now. Stock values have plummeted. Material inheritances have shrunk.

Peter writes his first letter to a group of “investors.” He even uses investment imagery such as “inheritance” and “gold.” Ironically, however, the investors who initially heard Peter’s letter had minimal material security. They were among the poorest people in their world.

So how can Peter call his materially impoverished hearers to sing our Epistolary Lesson’s hymn of praise: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” After all, the circumstances of some readers don’t seem conducive to such praise. What’s more, Peter’s adopted brothers and

sisters in Christ know how quickly some reasons we have for praising God can disappear.

In God's great mercy, the apostle writes in verse 3, God has mercifully given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. God has, in other words, promised God's adopted sons and daughters a completely secure and reliable inheritance.

At the heart of this are two phrases, "new birth" and "living hope," as well as one word, "inheritance." However, the perhaps key word is "inheritance." Peter says our "new birth" is, after all, into a "living hope" that is the "inheritance" about which he writes near the end of verse 3.

The subsequent "kept in heaven for you" suggests God's adopted children will inherit what verse 9 calls "the salvation of" our "souls." Quite simply, Christians' inheritance is God's gift of peace that we have through God's rescue of us from our natural enmity with God.

So God has "left" to God's adopted sons and daughters the forgiveness of our sins. However, God's dearly loved people have also "inherited" a restored relationship with our neighbors and God's creation. Our "inheritance" is salvation that we'll receive most fully in life in God's glorious presence in the new creation.

Of course, that inheritance may look to us like Christmas gifts of clothing looked to my young cousin John. When he opened a present like socks or a shirt, he'd simply toss them over his shoulder and move on to more fun gifts.

We're naturally more interested in material gifts than spiritual ones. But we know that no material inheritance will ever outlast us. You can't take material things with you. By contrast, Jesus' followers don't just enjoy peace with God, each other and the creation now. We'll also never "spend it all."

God's dearly beloved people have inherited all that life because on the first Easter God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Because Jesus physically walked out of his tomb, God graciously includes all who receive God's grace with their faith in Jesus Christ in God's "will."

Yet two things may make God's people question the security of our inheritance that is our salvation. The first is the ferocity of some suffering. The apostle alludes to it in verse 6 when he talks about having to "suffer grief in all kinds of trials." He also mentions being "refined by fire."

It's the kind of trials Indian Christians, for example, are enduring as they deal with what International Christian Concern calls a "spike in persecution." It's the kind of fire Kenyan Christians are walking through as religious extremists extensively and repeatedly persecute them.

But it isn't just overseas Christians who suffer grief in all kinds of trials. While the suffering COVID-19 imposes certainly isn't unique to Christians, the pandemic and all of the uncertainty that clings to it are affecting Jesus' followers.

Think too of what family crises, health scares and financial woes can do to people. Consider the siege laid on some of us by mental illness, loneliness, fear and worry. Or think about the extra abuse

and neglect some are suffering right now because they're afraid to leave toxic relationships and can't leave their homes.

Among the first results of that suffering may be the question, "Am I still one of God's beloved sons or daughters? Or has God 'kicked me out of' God's family?" In other words, "Is my heavenly inheritance that is my salvation still intact?"

Crusty old Larry embodied a second challenge to the perceived reliability of our heavenly inheritance. He'd spent most of his life alienating the people who loved him. But Larry was dying and it clearly scared him to death.

So his wife called me to their home to try to comfort him. Silent signs of the carnage Larry had caused were strewn around him. Virtually all that was left of him was a crusty shell. "I keep telling him God saved him when he was baptized," Larry's wife told me. "But it just doesn't make any difference."

Today I'd offer Larry a chance to confess his sins. Then, however, as a student pastor, I talked to Larry about God's grace alone by which we're saved. Yet all this man who knew he'd caused so much harm could do was sit there, his hands trembling and his chin quavering.

God saves God's adopted sons and daughters by God's grace that we can only receive with our faith. Yet we also know, as Peter says in verse 2, we've been saved "for obedience to Jesus Christ." Since Christians sometimes struggle to love God more than anything and our neighbors as much as ourselves, we sometimes wonder if that disqualifies us from the "salvation of" our "souls." Has God snatched it away from us and given it to more deserving Christians?"

On this first strange Sunday after a most strange Easter, can suffering Christians be sure we'll receive our inheritance from God? Can God's adopted children stride into the current uncertainties knowing nothing can happen to our heavenly inheritance?

In verse 4 Peter's resounding answer is "Yes!!" Our inheritance is "kept in heaven for" us. Jesus' adopted brothers and sisters don't keep our salvation by being faithful, kind or obedient. Nor do we automatically squander it by failing to be Christlike.

No, the inheritance that is our salvation is "kept" for us by the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. That God is so faithful that God won't ever let God's adopted children's inheritance fade, wither or sink underwater. Nothing in all of creation can change, waste or destroy our salvation.

I knew someone whose dying parents worried she'd squander her inheritance. So their will stipulated she receive only a tiny part of it each month. From the grave her parents kept her inheritance not only for, but also from her.

While even God's children are quite capable of squandering material inheritances, we simply can't squander our heavenly inheritance. It isn't ours, after all, to either keep or spend. God keeps God's adopted sons and daughters' inheritance for but not from us.

Yet most of us know people who at one time loved God but now don't love the Lord anymore. Reformed Christians deduce that the Scriptures teach that we can't squander our heavenly inheritance. However, all of Jesus' adopted brothers and sisters can trust that those who faithfully receive God's grace have a heavenly inheritance that awaits us.

Yet we also admit that there's more mystery in the loss of Christian faith than we could solve in a world of lifetimes.

So God's adopted children leave the eternal fate of those who've turned their backs on the Lord in the nail-scarred hands of Christ our loving benefactor.

Because Christians have the guarantee of the inheritance that is our salvation, we can rejoice, even if we suffer what Peter calls in verse 6 "grief in all kinds of trials." However, we never mistake such rejoicing for being happy.

Trial's grief doesn't make healthy people happy. Yet we can find contentment and peace in their face anyway, because we know they're part of what it means to share Christ's suffering.

Christians who suffer, especially for Jesus' sake, experience a taste of what Jesus suffered for our sakes. We even learn to see it as a confirmation of the inheritance that is our salvation.

But such peace and contentment makes Jesus' adopted brothers and sisters "oddballs." It makes us what Peter calls in verse 1 "strangers in the world." In fact, throughout his first letter he suggests that our inheritance in some ways alienates us from some of those who don't share it. The new perspective it gives us on both ourselves and our world makes us not better, but slightly different from the dominant culture.

Illustration Idea

On its website, the United States Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation calls itself "an independent agency created by the Congress to maintain stability and public confidence in the nation's financial system by insuring deposits ..." The FDIC does that by, among other things, examining and supervising American financial institutions. Its website even boasts, "Since 1933, no depositor has lost a penny of FDIC-insured funds." So material inheritances that come out of insured financial institutions are at least reasonably secure.

But, of course, the same can't be said for other material investments. It's not just that recent events have battered worldwide financial markets. It's also that, as experts repeatedly remind us, "Past performance is no guarantee of future results." So financial advisers encourage investors to make good investing decisions based not on recent "scorecards," but on sound strategies.

Compare that to God's beloved children's heavenly inheritance. God's past performance is one guarantee of God's future "results." God graciously insures our heavenly inheritance.



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