

This week as I was examining the scripture, Peter's words to his sisters and brothers in Asia Minor jumped out of the page and hit me right in my heart.

The early church in Asia Minor – consisted of a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians – or followers of “the way”. Peter – or his scribe, Sylvania – wrote this first letter to the Churches in Asia Minor around the year 63 AD when Peter was imprisoned in Rome near the time of his execution. This would have been around 25-30 years after the happenings in the text Bryce read for you earlier.

Now, the churches to whom this letter was addressed were all in different provinces in Asia Minor – And each province had its own indigenous language – sharing Greek as a common tongue. These early Christians may have been former Jewish converts, former Gentile converts to Judaism and then to the Way of Christ – or they could have been converted to the way of Christ as gentiles. The communities across the provinces did not have much in common – socially, politically, ethnically.

In verses 1 and 2, Peter refers to the people to whom he's writing as “exiled”. Likely the people weren't actually exiled – but were, perhaps, excluded, kicked out of their homes and land, perhaps they were poor – either way exiled meant that they no longer held an inheritance – perhaps they were kicked out of their families for their beliefs. You could say that they were the “not cool” kids in school. Yet this first letter from Peter – in these first three sentences – all the differences were disregarded considering what brought them together. And what brought them together was the risen Christ.

We read:

1 Peter 1:3-9

³ 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,

⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,

⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith

for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶ In this you rejoice,

even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,

⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith

—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire

—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him;

and even though you do not see him now,

you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,

⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith,

the salvation of your souls.

Peter was writing to congregations where the people who had at one time been abandoned and rejected by their peers – disinherited from their holdings, the land, their family, misunderstood, misinterpreted, mistreated, and maligned...were rebirthed into a new family by the compassion of God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Without the living resurrected Christ, the people in these churches would not and could not have hope that they would EVER belong anywhere. It was their faith in a God who resurrected Christ – a God of new life and new beginnings – of new birth – that united the churches into the family of Christ.

When we read, “new birth” it is not the same as our understanding of being “born again”. It is a different concept. Yes, it is accepting the lord and savior as your own into your heart – but it is also, more importantly, being re-born – re-generated / re-formed into a new family where their inheritance rests in a place where it will never be taken from them. It means being re-born into a family of re-born brothers and sisters all with the same inheritance – re-born into a new way of looking at ethics, money, even gender roles and social class and most of all hope.

My friend, former parishioner, professor, biblical theologian and fellow proclaimer, the late Erland Waltner spent many years studying and teaching about Peter’s first letter. Erland writes, “New birth for Peter is an action of God by which Christian believers have come into a new life, transformed by hope and love. Born of God (Waltner, Erland, and J. Daryl Charles. *1-2 Peter, Jude (Believers Church Bible Commentary)*, Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA, 1999, pp. 45).”

Without the example and trust in the resurrected Christ, God’s promises would have disintegrated – they would have meant nothing. The churches – this newly reborn community – would have had NO HOPE – they would have disbanded (Waltner, 34).

However, through the resurrection, the early church was reborn into a new inheritance – and into living hope. This living hope was the glue that keeps a follower of Christ a follower of Christ – in essence – it was the glue that holds the church together.

“Biblical hope is strong, confident and ground for transformation of life.” Living hope is stretching out toward, waiting for, longing for. It is to wait with expectation and anticipation. This kind of hope is alive! It gives assurance, it is active, it is faith (Waltner, 43)

All this – rebirth into hope and into an imperishable inheritance is because of God’s great mercy and it is for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last days.

Like our present understanding of being born anew was understood differently by the early Church, our present understanding of “salvation” is not what Peter meant.

Instead of, a “are you washed in the blood” salvific one-time event, for Peter and the early church, salvation was like the kingdom of God – now and not yet. Also, for Peter and the early church, salvation could not be looked at just individually – but from within the community. God’s mercy showed to us through Christ’s resurrection meant the whole community – all church families everywhere were saved now and in the time to come (Waltner, 50).

Now, knowing what we know now about the communities to whom Peter was writing, that they were a people who fully embraced the hope and promise of God’s great love for them, as witnessed through the resurrection of Christ. These were the ones of whom we read in John 1:12-13 ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Knowing what we know of them – it is no wonder that they were rejected, abandoned, exiled by their peers. These were people whose faith changed EVERY WAY they lived. They were no longer individuals – but were one body. They were no longer strangers – but friends. They shared what they had so all would be fed, housed, clothed. And shared a living hope and a joy that could not be quashed.

We read, in the next sentence:

⁶In this you rejoice,
even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,
⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that,
though perishable,
is tested by fire
—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

This sentence, like the previous one, can also be misread – especially if we read it from within our own context. It becomes easy to hear, “rejoice in your suffering.” But this is NOT what it means.

Firstly, the word that we translate to read, “to suffer” does not mean “oppression or affliction”, but rather it means something like, “to endure, put up with or tolerate.”

Likewise, we don’t hear the inflection that is present in the Greek. IN THIS, REJOICE – doesn’t mean rejoice in your suffering, but rather, rejoice in all that God has done for them in Christ. “In this – the mercies of God, the living hope, the security of the inheritance and the full deliverance that Christians anticipate...all these together made it possible for the churches, to whom Peter wrote, to tolerate or put up with their various experiences in a grace-empowered way, with joy.

We could say it differently. Christians rejoice in their suffering. They do not rejoice BECAUSE they are enduring trials but rejoice IN THE MIDST of their trials because of their strength of faith in the resurrected Christ and sense of belonging to the family of God. THIS IS REAL LIVING HOPE (emphasis mine, Waltner, 38-39)

Now the last sentence is mostly self-explanatory, except for our understanding of the last word, which is *soul*. We read: Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Modern Western understanding of the soul is that part of us that goes to heaven after we die. However, Peter looks at “soul” from the Hebrew perspective, where the soul of a person is the whole self. Thus, the outcome of their faith is that every part of a person - their relationships, their thoughts, their actions, even their immortal soul– all parts of the one reborn into the family of God - are saved through their hope and faith in God as known and shown in the resurrection of Christ (Waltner 40-41)

Friends. Without the risen Christ – if God did not raise Christ from the dead there would be no hope. With no hope there would be no faith, no new life, no changed life, no belonging – no forgiveness, no “let’s try this again” no nothing. Without Christ raised from the dead there would be only death. The early Christians believed in the resurrected Christ. The early Christians knew that because God raised Christ from the dead, then God could work in them a wonderful new creation. That with the power of the resurrection, they too would become a new creation. That with the power of Christ’s resurrection, death – in all its form was never the end.

I like how Fredrich Buechner puts it, “Resurrection means the worst thing is not the last thing.”

So what does all this mean for the rest of us – how can we take what we’ve learned from these 3 sentences and apply it to our life? Are you, like me, moved by the witness of our ancient sisters and brothers to a fresh new understanding of Christ’s resurrection?

Our early Anabaptist fore-mothers and fathers loved this letter, and many quoted these 3 sentences in letters and essays and even hymns. Echoes of these three sentences are found in the hymn #444 “I sing with Exultation” by Felix Manz. Felix was an anabaptist martyr who was drowned in 1527. In this hymn Felix sings with exultation “to God who brings salvation and frees from death’s dread night.” (444 VT and Waltner, 50)

Menno Simons, where Mennonites get the name – considered new birth of such importance that he wrote a vigorous essay on it. Menno said, “new birth from which comes penitent, pious life which has the promise, can only originate in the Word of the LORD, rightly taught and rightly understood and received in the heart by faith through the Holy Spirit.”

He continues, For those who are born anew through the power of the resurrected Christ – these know no “hatred and vengeance, ... for they love those who hate them; they do good to those who spitefully use them and pray for those who persecute them...they feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, they entertain the needy, release prisoners, visit the sick, comfort the fainthearted, admonish the erring, are ready, after X’s example to give their lives for their brethren. They are the children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks and know war no more. (52)

Our Anabaptist forebearers faced death in all forms – and what gave them living hope was their secure faith in a God who, in his great mercy, resurrected Christ from the dead. In God who would never not ever let death be the end of God’s eternal love.

And what about you?

This week after Easter – when all the candies have been eaten and we’ve gone on to our normal well-to-do and comfortable lives – are we still pondering the mystery? What do we do with this knowledge of the resurrection of Christ? Does it even affect us anymore? Does the power of the resurrected Christ still move in us? Does it still move us? Is there still living hope somewhere within us or has it been forgotten, let go, or been destroyed?

Can we, like our early church and anabaptist sisters and brothers, awaken from our complacency and entitlement to see Christ reaching out and inviting us to re-generation – rebirth into a family where the things that make for death are dismantled and destroyed by the love of God through Jesus the resurrected Christ.