

A Firm Faith
Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Easter (Quasimodogeniti)
Sermon Text: 1 Peter 1:3-9



Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸Though you have not seen Him, you love Him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

In the movie, “Catch Me If You Can,” a young man impersonates a pilot even though he had never trained as an airplane pilot. Despite lacking qualifications, he successfully convinced people that he truly was a pilot and could therefore take over the role of pilot. This story shows us that it's possible to play a role convincingly even if there is no foundation for it. The main thing is that it feels good and looks good. That was the case in this movie about a fake pilot and about many other things. When it comes to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and our faith in Jesus, it isn't enough for us to hold on to someone who only pretends to have power over sin, death, and the devil. Instead, we would prefer to firmly hold on to someone who truly conquered these things. However, it seems to me that many Christians make do with a faith that just feels good and which doesn't even have to be true. For example, in a school, a religion teacher presents his students with the challenge of Jesus Christ's resurrection. On the one hand, it isn't explainable that the disciples of Jesus were only successful world missionaries after the death of their Lord. They were after all just fishermen, shepherds, and farmers. They also failed miserably by betraying and denying their Lord and then fleeing from Him. The question these students had to tackle was this: What was it that the disciples had experienced? And what changed them so drastically? Finally, the teacher asked this question: would faith in Jesus be less valuable if Jesus had not truly been resurrected, making the story only a vision or a dream. At this point, the teacher wanted to elicit a decisive “no” because he thought the students also had an interest in whether something was true or false. He was astonished to realize that it wasn't important at all to the students whether Jesus had risen from the dead or not. And the popular opinion was that faith could do without the foundation of the true resurrection if it helps people to overcome a crisis or otherwise makes them feel good. This answer that the students had is typical. It shows how people have such a small interest in topics related to faith. “The important thing is that it feels good!” So people can actually hold fast to any religion or philosophy as long as it helps them a little. This victory of subjective experience over faith is a catastrophe that leads to the belief that we don't actually need Christ but should rely solely on the good feelings that we ourselves must produce. We have therefore reverted to the law.

Peter's first letter is based on a very different foundation. He doesn't pretend anything but claims with great emotion that we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The truth of the resurrection of our Lord is a fundamental fact on which our faith stands or falls. It is, so to speak, my identity card or my qualification, through which I am included in God's family and know that I am a child of God. Without the resurrection of our Lord, there is no faith and no rationality to be a Christian. This resurrection of Jesus that moved Peter so much is by no means something that can be observed and marveled at from the outside. We Christians will also not be made to be little salespeople who must hold high the banner of our Lord Jesus against all opposition. We don't need to frantically force ourselves to save a lost cause or even pretend to be what we are not by putting on a good face. No, what happens to us is much bigger. Jesus isn't just a memory for us, rather He is within us through His Spirit. The resurrection of our Lord is therefore not just a piece of our baggage, which we must carry and endure alongside so many other things. This resurrection belongs to us and becomes a part of us! That means that you are the living hope of our Lord

Jesus, in person! And the resurrection of our Lord Jesus ignites you to a completely new life in which not only normal human mercy comes into effect, but God's great mercy, which knows no bounds! And all of that begins to work right where I am: in my family, at my job, when I decide what I will do with my life. All of that can only be understood with the words: born again.

The Apostle Peter writes a letter that deals with this new identity. The words that Peter's letter gives us come from the baptismal liturgy. The early Christians were baptized into Jesus and planted in Jesus like this. Just as the Lord did so long ago when He appeared to the disciples after His resurrection and said to them: "Peace be with you!", so also He does that still today and strengthens us through His Word and Holy Communion. But this new life in Christ also includes the truth that we can't get through life without challenges and attacks from Satan. We don't always experience God and His power as tangible evidence. Setbacks like illness, failure, or death can cause us to doubt our faith. But it could also be that we must endure a spiritual battle; we could find it difficult to believe or to pray; or it could be that we must suffer violent persecution. That's what the congregations during Peter's time experienced. And in many parts of the world, it is still like that today. It is in this precise situation that we know the presence of our Lord and cry out "Kyrie Eleison!" Lord, have mercy!

Since the very beginning of the world, the promises of God could only be recognized vaguely. Abraham had to go to a strange land and live for many years without visible success before he could see a piece of God's promise. Likewise with Joseph who had to spend years in prison before he could recognize this difficult path as God's plan. David had to struggle with his own sins, and little Zacchaeus in the New Testament had to bear the disdain of his people for years before Jesus went to his house and Zacchaeus could experience forgiveness. Jesus Himself had to give up all hope for life and die on the cross before God would raise Him from the dead. It was the same for the first church and it is the same for the whole Christian church in every generation. Peter especially, the author of these words, knew first-hand what it meant to deny God and to be separated from Him. When he denied Jesus three times in the Passion narrative, he thought that his faith was over. And then this same Peter heard Jesus' words: "Feed my lambs!" If that isn't great mercy! That's why Peter, like no other, knows how to speak of new hope in the midst of sadness. Could it be that we also receive a completely new hope? If so, then only because Jesus lives! We don't live in remembrance of a loved one who has left behind a good example. No, we live from a Jesus who is now present through His Holy Spirit. And if He is with us, then it is not what we are experiencing that matters, but the fact that He is there! The same applies to heaven, which Peter describes for us as an inheritance. Heaven is therefore only beautiful because God is there and because we will then see Him face to face. A heaven that wants to attract us with worldly pleasures is actually no better than the young man who portrayed himself as a pilot, even though he never went through any training. A heaven without God would not be heaven, but hell! Peter's letter wants to describe this living God who we will then see face to face in heaven. Yes, the day will come when we will see Him and He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Then all misunderstandings will also be resolved. And this God will not only be there at some undetermined time in the future... He is already there now! He accompanies us even now in the many calamities that want to make us sad here on earth.

You can tell from the words of Peter's letter that the matter concerns him personally. That's why he doesn't just talk about a normal hope, but of a living hope. And God didn't call us to a worldly inheritance that can be exchanged for another philosophy or religion at the first sign of unpleasantness, but to a heavenly inheritance that will endure for eternity. We are listening to someone who has witnessed Christ's resurrection himself. When Peter speaks of mercy, he has experienced it first-hand. We no longer belong to the old crowd. We have received a completely new life, and this new life gives us a totally different direction for life... and that is living faith. It was this faith that has defied the persecution of Christians to this day. It was this faith that still accompanies the many Christians in prisons and torture chambers of the world today. It is faith that has overcome the world. And it's nothing to wonder about because this faith is more than faith – it is God Himself. Amen.