

April 19, 2020 – 1 Peter 1:3-9

One of the things that often surprises people about me is how much I know about religions other than Christianity. I guess they just assume that being a Christian pastor means that I only ever studied the Bible. In reality, I've had to spend quite a bit of time learning about other world religions.

It's good to know about other religions. It helps you understand the world and how we relate to people of different faiths. Understanding their perspective and their values, so that you can make a good confession to them, as St Paul calls us to do so. Without needlessly offending them or antagonizing them.

And you might be wondering, doesn't that introduce temptation? I mean isn't there a chance that if you learn enough about another religion, you might be tempted to believe something about it? Maybe that's true for others, but it's never really been the case for me. Because as I've studied other faiths, I've realized how different they all are from what I believe.

There's Islam. Founded by Muhammed. Who was born in roughly the year 570 A.D and died in the year 622 A.D. There's Buddhism. Founded by Gautama Buddha. Who was born in the year 563 B.C and died in the 483 B.C. There's Confucianism. Founded by Confucius. Who was born in the year 551 B.C. and died in the year 479 B.C. Lao Tzu. Founder of Taoism. Born in 604 B.C. Died in 531 B.C. Zoroaster. Founder of Zoroastrianism. Born in 625 B.C. Died in 583 B.C.

If you're not seeing the theme here, I'll spell it out for you: they're all dead. They were all born. They all died. And they all stayed dead.

And I don't want to completely dismiss what they taught. Because some of them had some pretty impressive ideas and had a profound impact on our world. They were important teachers and philosophers. But they're all dead.

And that's just not good enough for me. If I wanted to follow the teachings of some ordinary person who was born and lived and died, I'd make my own religion. I'm a pretty smart guy. I could come up with something believable. You'd all follow me, right?

Well, you shouldn't. Because I'm not any different than Muhammed or Buddha or Confucius or any of the others. In the end, I'm just another dead guy. Hopefully not any time soon. But give me fifty, sixty years. I'm just going to be another tombstone in a graveyard. And then where will you be?

This is what Peter is talking about in our Epistle lesson today. *"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."*

A living hope. Not a dead hope based on the teachings of a dead man. A living hope. Because the one we follow is still alive. And will live forevermore.

He did die once. And if you want to see what dead hope looks like, look at his followers after his crucifixion. They put his body in a tomb, they go home, and they lock themselves in a room. Because they have no hope in the one they followed. They look around and say, "The Jewish authorities killed him. They're going to kill us. And we are dead men."

The women who go to the tomb that morning had the same attitude. The last they saw Jesus, his lifeless body was being laid in a tomb. And a giant stone was being rolled in front of it.

And on their way to the tomb Easter morning, that's all they can think about. How are we going to move that stone so that we can give him a proper burial? They expect the tomb to look exactly the way they left it. As a place of dead hope.

And when they get there and find that it's not, they're terrified. When they get there and hear the message of the angels, and find out that they have a living hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, they don't even know what to do with it. Because no one in the history of the world has had that kind of living hope.

But is the resurrection only a huge deal because it's unique. No, the resurrection is a huge deal because it validates everything that Jesus said. It gives authority to his message that goes beyond any other human teacher.

So when Jesus says that we must be born again of water and the spirit, we know that through the resurrection we have been born again. Born again into this living hope. Born again by baptism into a life that cannot die.

When Jesus says that we should not store up treasures on earth, but instead treasures in heaven, we know that through the resurrection we have treasures in heaven. We have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. Kept in heaven for us. Because by faith we are sons and daughters of God.

And when Jesus says that he has given his followers eternal life and no one can snatch them out of his hand, we know that through the resurrection he does indeed have the power to guard us through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

This is our living hope. That even as the world crumbles around us. Even as immorality and corruption reign over our societies. Even as they reign in our own hearts sometimes. Tempting us with sin. And driving us to all manner of evil and deceit, for which we are ashamed.

Still, we have this living hope. That tells us of God's great mercy. To forgive and strengthen us. So that we may rejoice even in the midst of suffering. So that we may be tested by fire and found genuine in our faith.

Because, right now, we are going through a time of testing. A time of trial. We are tested by the suffering of disease and the pain of death. We are tested by the frustration of unemployment and the fear of the future. We are tested by separation and isolation and the upheaval of all that we called normal.

But, maybe most of all, we're tested by this time in which we are separated from our church. From worshipping together and hearing God's Word together and receiving the sacrament together. We are separated from the fellowship of believers whom we count on for support and the encouragement we receive from one another.

Going through a time of testing is always hard. But going through a time of testing alone, without anyone to support you, is even harder. And yet, I look at the men in our lessons today and I find hope.

Because the other two lessons highlight men who were tested and failed. Peter, whose faith was tested outside of Jesus' trial, and fell flat on his face. Denying his Lord three times. And Thomas, who heard the eyewitness testimony of the resurrection from his fellow disciples and still refused to believe.

These men were tested by fire and utterly fell apart. But I have to think it only made their faith stronger. Because when Peter and Thomas and all the disciples were put to the test before the Jewish Council, they confronted the very same men who put Jesus to death with absolute confidence. They faced down death itself and didn't even flinch.

And having been through that, they knew once and for all that their faith was genuine. That they could face anything that sin, death, or the devil could throw at them and make it through unscathed. That their faith in the living hope of Jesus Christ was the most precious thing that they could hold onto.

Because when everything else fails, when the world around us fails, when our own flesh fails, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead gives us an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us. And that our faith in his work guards us for a salvation that is yet to be revealed.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. And though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. And obtain the outcome of your faith: the salvation of your souls.

For we have a God who lives. We have a great teacher who did not stay dead. And we have the testimony of those who saw him. Not so that we hear it and tell no one, like those with a dead hope. But so that we hear it and tell everyone of our living hope, which is worth more than anything in the entire world.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.