

**+ 1 Peter 3:13-22 + Living Hope Has No Need to Fear +
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 6th Sunday of Easter + 21 May 2017 +**

CIR HIRI!¹

Britain stood alone. Nazi thugs controlled much of Europe. Yes, the English army had just staged a dramatic escape across the English Channel from Dunkirk, but everyone knew that Britain had suffered a crushing defeat. Across the Channel, they stood alone waiting for the Nazi blitzkrieg to begin blasting away at their cities and towns and homes. Their very way of life, including their history and their future, was in grave danger.

Fear gripped the English people. Against this gloomy backdrop, on June 4, 1940, Winston Churchill stood up to speak in the British House of Commons. He had been prime minister for only three and a half weeks, but you'd never know that from what he said. ***“We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...”***² What Churchill said that day put fire in the hearts of the British people and steel in their backbones for the war ahead.³

The Christians stood alone. They were scattered among the towns and cities throughout the Roman province of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The known world was under the control of pagan unbelievers from the emperor on down. Yes, those Christians sought the good of their neighborhoods and communities, but through pagan eyes, they were odd, even dangerous. “Why don't they go to the theater or to the games? Why don't they go out and get hammered with us? Why don't they go to the temple sacrifice meals? Do they think they're better than us? Do they want to bring down the wrath of the gods on our city?” Those strange actions pushed the Christians out to the margins.

Yet those actions also spoke God's condemning Law to the hearts of their pagan relatives and friends. Now when the human heart experiences guilt, you want to get rid of it. Scattered among those cities of Asia Minor, the Christians stood alone as the tension and heat of persecution slowly turned up. Pagan friends tried to corrupt them. Pagan family members moved from curiosity to frustration to hostility towards their Christian loved ones. Others threatened their livelihoods and their property. If you wanted a job? Good luck if you're a Christian! Local civic leaders started questioning their loyalty. It was only a matter of time before words became something much more physical, terrifying, painful. The Christians stood alone as a blitzkrieg of persecution rumbled in the distance and fear gripped their hearts.

Against this gloomy backdrop, the Lord inspired his disciple Peter to write a letter to those Christians standing alone among the scattered cities of Asia Minor. To put fire in their hearts and steel in their backbones, they needed hope, but not an “I hope so” hope. No, they needed what you and I need to give us strength and encouragement. They needed living hope in Christ.

Peter has living hope for all followers of Christ whether scattered and alone among the cities of 1st century Asia Minor or scattered and alone among the cities and towns of 21st century America. While life as a Christian in America is far safer than it was in 1st century Asia Minor, have you noticed how Christians are getting pushed farther and farther out towards the fringe? “Do you really believe what the Bible says about creation or sex and marriage or that God says there's only one way to heaven or that I'm not free to do what I want with my body or whatever grows in my body? Do you actually believe that?”

In our workplaces or neighborhoods, we are more likely to experience cold distance than heated hostility. Yet there are places in our society where hostility towards Biblical Christianity is not so subtle. We are more like those scattered Christians of Asia Minor than we might realize. We aren't facing violent persecution yet. We may not even hear the distant rumblings of a persecution blitzkrieg yet, but we still need to hear what Peter has to say.

¹ “Christ is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” This is known as the Paschal Greeting, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, “Christ is risen!”, they respond loudly and boldly, “He is risen indeed!”

² <https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches>.

³ The idea behind this introduction was received with thanks from Pres. Paul Wendland of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

You see, questions that have filled the minds of Christians for the last 2,000 years fill our minds too. “Why should I suffer for doing good? Doesn’t God want me to follow his holy will? Why suffer for righteousness? Is following Christ really worth all this hardship and pain? Why face opposition from the culture around me, the people who know and love me, or from my own sinful nature inside? How can I possibly avoid being overcome by fear?”

With all these questions swirling around us, Peter steps forward to respond to our questions and to remove our fears. He looks you in the eye and tells you what you need to hear. “In Christ, you have living hope. Are you eager to do good? Are you eagerly trying to serve the Lord, to show love not just for him, but for your neighbors, even when they insult you? Yes, it doesn’t make sense that you should suffer for following the holy will of God, **but even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed.**”

Now wait a minute, Peter! That doesn’t make sense. Suffering for doing good means I’m going to be blessed? Suffering for following God’s will because it goes against the grain of the culture around me? Suffering for obeying God when my sinful nature screams to do the very opposite, to give in to my lusts, to do what I and I alone want? How can I be blessed in any of that?

“In Christ, you have living hope, and living hope has no need to fear. Remember how I urged you as an exile to abstain from what your sinful desires want to do, to live your life in such an honorable way that those who slander you will one day glorify our gracious God. Well, it’s not just living a holy life. No, **in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.**”

“Don’t just live honorably. Let your gentleness and respect put their hostility to shame. Speak the truth in love giving the reason for the living hope you have in your heart, even if what you say is not smooth and polished. Let your love for Christ shine through in what you say and how you speak. Your holy actions can’t change hearts, but they will put the focus on what you say—and what you say, putting Christ before their eyes, can change their lives eternally. In the end, **it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil**, because God will bless you and others through it.”

Friends, what is the reason for the hope you have? How can you face suffering for the sake of Christ? Why does living hope have no need to fear? Peter puts fire in our hearts and steel in our backbones by pointing us to Jesus. **“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.”**

Christ also suffered. Look at all the blessing, all the good, all the peace and forgiveness and eternal life that happened because **Christ also suffered.** He suffered **“once for sins.”** He gave himself up as the once-and-for-all sacrifice for the sins of every human being, even you, even me, but there was a reason for that! **“That he might bring us to God,”** that we could stand in the presence of the holy God. On our own, that wasn’t going to happen. We’re just too dead in sin, too naturally hostile towards God, too blind in our cravings.

So Jesus had to leave heaven behind. He had to endure suffering and even death to deliver us, but then he was glorified. Jesus conquered death. Now he lives. In that glorified state, Jesus actually descended into hell, not to suffer more, but to declare victory to all those who had rejected and slandered and opposed him and his Word and his people, including a believer named Noah.

You see, a couple thousand years before the birth of Christ, the number of believers on earth had dwindled down to a single family of eight people. Eight believers stood alone. Just imagine the fear that gripped them. Things were so bad that God threatened to wipe out all life on earth with a worldwide flood, but in mercy, he gave 120 years for people to turn from their sins and live. Now God had two special tasks for the father of that family—that man named Noah. He was to build an ark in which animals from all creation would be preserved—along with his family. He was also supposed to proclaim the Word of God, but what happened? For 120 years, everyone kept on ridiculing and opposing and slandering and hating Noah and his family. Everyone, except those eight believers, rejected God’s call to turn from their sins and live. Imagine how terrifying that must have been. Everyone was against them, so what did God do? God rescued Noah and his family with the flood.

Why does living hope have no need to fear? Look at what God has accomplished for us through water! **“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is**

at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.” God rescued Noah and his family through the waters of the flood. In a similar way, God saved you through Baptism, not to scrub you clean of dirt, but to enable you to stand in his courtroom with the legal claim that you have been washed clean of all your sins ***“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”***

So then, what do you have to fear in this life when your eternity is safe? Who do you have to fear in this life when you’ve been made a holy child of the King who rules all things for your good and who even blesses you if he should allow you to suffer for following him? We could be afraid of standing alone. We could be afraid of being scattered with a blitzkrieg of persecution rumbling on the horizon. We could, but we don’t. We have received living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We endure suffering for doing good because Jesus, who suffered, has also risen from the dead. We have been saved through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That good news puts fire in our hearts and steel in our backbones for the labors ahead. In Christ, we have living hope, and living hope has no need to fear. **CIR HIRI!** Alleluia! Amen.