

**2 Easter – Year A – May 1, 2011**  
**Acts 2:1-4a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20: 19-31**  
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You may already have noticed that as far as retail businesses and much of the world are concerned, Easter is over. For those of us who experienced the intense and glorious days of Holy Week, culminating in the joy of Resurrection Sunday, we too might be feeling that dip in energy and excitement that comes after our Easter day feast and celebrations. There's a reason why newborn babies sleep a lot. Being born – entering a loud, bright, and smelly world – is not just labor intensive for the mother, it's strenuous and overwhelming for the new baby as well, especially when we find that we're completely dependent on others for food and shelter, care and protection.

We hear so much from Paul's prolific letters, that it's a nice change to have Peter's perspective to look at today. A little background will help us to appreciate where he's coming from, and show us just how relevant his message is for today. Peter is writing to a dispersed group of Christians, mostly gentiles, many of whom are slaves and women struggling against the cultural demands of those in charge who are not believers. They are a marginalized minority in rather hostile territory. These Christians are also being harassed and persecuted for their belief in Jesus. As a community of mostly middle-class, relatively wealthy Americans, we may find it difficult to understand what that kind of life looks like. We're free to come to church, buy religious books, study Scripture, pray and worship together. However, we are largely prohibited from sharing our faith overtly in the workplace, other public arenas, or in the classrooms of our schools, except in the most subtle ways. There are ongoing legal challenges against public displays of Christian symbols, nativity scenes, and verses of Scripture like the Ten Commandments. In fact, as faithful Christians, who choose to live our faith, we are very much at odds with our society. We often stand on the outside edge of the circles of power. Living out of a Christian position on controversial issues, like equality and justice for all, define us as minority opponents of the most popular social and political trends. Let's just say that standing firm to the Christian ethic of sharing our money and other God-given gifts to benefit others ahead of ourselves is not likely to get us an invitation to dine with Warren Buffet anytime soon, or an invite to his company's annual meeting, lauded as the Woodstock of capitalism. All to say, that while we may not be facing physical violence because of our faith, there are plenty of ways that modern Christians are pushed to the margins of popular culture.

A wonderful African-American spiritual says, "You may have all this world, but give me Jesus". Outside of our community of faith, or the company of other Christians, we face tough choices every day that leave a mark on us, drain us emotionally and spiritually, or leave us feeling very vulnerable, perhaps out of sync with an increasingly indifferent, or antagonistic world. Peter's letter offers comfort, encouragement and hope for the first century Christians and for us. It begins with prayer, praise and worship to God or what Karl Barth tells us is "The first and basic act of theological work". Whatever you might see in the stores, Easter is most definitely not over! The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the beginning of new life for us and for all who come to Him in faith. Our fifty days of feasting, give us the opportunity to respond in faith to all that we have witnessed through Lent, Holy Week, and the incredible events of the resurrection of Jesus, God's decisive act of salvific grace for the whole world. This is time to live boldly in the hope of the resurrection. Salvation *is* the hope of new and unending life in Christ when our earthly journey is completed, but it is equally a quality of life in the here and now. According to Tillich, salvation is wholeness of being, and healing, both now as well as in the future. In faith, this hope dwells with us like a flame burning in our hearts, which empowers us to stay grounded in God's peace and joy, whatever else happens in our lives. By God's grace, this gift of hope transcends daily trials and tribulations, and the transient 'feel good' moments that society equates with happiness. Joy in Christ Jesus goes much deeper than feeling good, because Christian joy is permeated by the presence and glory of God. Our joy comes in response to God's gracious and merciful acts towards humanity throughout salvation history, and

particularly in the resurrection of His Son our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Peter expresses the resurrection in a believer's life as regeneration or rebirth. Our identity as Christ's own, the seal of our Baptism into His death and resurrection, is a result of God's initiative. It reminds us of just how dependent we really are on God – just as a newborn is entirely dependent on his or her parents. The only thing we can give to God is ourselves. Our response is rightly filled with thanks and praise for all God has done for us. Our love of Christ, our faith, our joy, our hope are all living and active, growing, deepening and broadening as we develop our relationship with God and the Lord Jesus. We are all still living in a kind of grey zone, which is the gap between the inauguration of God's kingdom in Christ Jesus, the gift of salvation wrought for us in His resurrection, and the final consummation of the promise. That means that we are still vulnerable to suffering.

Jesuit Priest and author, James Martin, tells the story of how he came to experience God in a new and more profound way through his own struggle with a painful condition that limited the use of his hands. He explored the Biblical history of suffering – everything from the idea that suffering is a kind of purification in the lives of the faithful, or a way to participate in the life of Christ, the suffering servant, to suffering as an inevitable part of living in an imperfect world. None of his studies made much sense to him, until he discovered the writings of Dorothy Soelle, who describes three stages in a Christian approach to suffering. The first is accepting the reality of suffering. The second is dying to self, which is “letting go of the part of oneself that wants to control the future or deny the suffering.” The third stage is to experience a new receptiveness to God. Soelle's approach concentrates on the love of God rather than focusing on the affliction, while not denying the suffering. In Martin's words, Soelle's way “is not one of stoicism or mere toleration, but of affirming that suffering is part of the great *yes* to life as a whole... that can open us up to experiencing God in a new way.” Ask anyone who's currently enduring chronic or severe pain whether they're experiencing God in a new way, and you're likely to get an angry response! Indeed, Martin shares that it took him many months, and a great deal of prayer and reflection to understand God's presence in and through his own agony. Ultimately, he confesses that the pain gave him a greater sense of gratitude for anything he writes, because writing is only possible for him during short periods of remission. He shares that the pain helped him to become more patient, realizing that he couldn't do everything at once, but really did have to take it one day at a time. He learned to let go of a lot of pride, and became more sensitive and compassionate towards others. Finally, he experienced the gift of conscious reliance on God, knowing how dependent he truly was on God's grace and mercy in his life. While we're not called to seek out suffering, when it finds us, we too may find a way to a closer relationship with God and with others.

We take our health and independence so much for granted that it's frequently puzzling when we meet people who have the least, and who suffer greatly in life, who positively radiate a profound love of Christ, and clearly live from a place of deep peace and great joy. They're also the people who most readily share their faith and hope, give thanks and praise to God at every opportunity. As Peter reminds us in his letter, we don't necessarily have to suffer to live with great hope and joy today, because we are all “receiving the outcome of our faith” in the hope of salvation, and blessed healing by God's grace. As Matthew says, when we put our faith in action, we let our light shine before others, so that they may see ... and give glory to [our] Father in heaven.” The Easter message is like an indelible stamp on our hearts and minds. By God's grace and faith in Christ, the Easter message of hope, peace and joy is born anew in each of us every day. It is an unending gift of God's grace!

Amen.