

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3-9 (at the end of this document)

There are two letters attributed to Peter, also known as Simon Peter in the New Testament. Scholars believe that neither of the letters in the New Testament, 1st or 2nd Peter, was written by Peter and that in fact, each letter was written by a different author. Attributing writings to disciples was a common practice in the early days of the church. By doing so, the authors wished to increase the chances of them being taken seriously by the faithful.

The purpose of writing down stories and testimonies of faith is to help others grow in their own faith and to stay strong during challenging times. Stories and testimonies help us to look to the future – a future filled with the presence of God, the companionship of Jesus, and the possibilities fully known by the Holy Spirit. One of the most valuable aspects of our Thursday morning Bible Study is the sharing of stories of faith by the participants. I treasure this experience and wish more of you could have it as well.

On Easter Sunday, Gina Adams read us the story of two women approaching the empty tomb. They first encountered an angel and then Jesus himself. Together they rejoiced at his resurrection and then they shared their stories with others. Hmm, that is most boring summary I have ever read! Nothing more than bare bones. Stories need more than facts to be helpful or memorable.

Vivid stories help us to imagine the reactions of others, to share in their experience, and find parallels with our own lives. Stories rarely directly state spiritual truths, principles or religious beliefs. When we hear stories and especially, when we find *ourselves* in these stories, we feel the beliefs hidden within them, like feeling our ribs under our skins. The beliefs give support and *structure* to the stories, not the other way around.

The Letter from 1st Peter is not a story about an event. It is a series of ideas, like the bones that underly the skin and muscles and tendons that make up our body.

Do you remember seeing a skeleton in a museum, whether it was for a bird or a dinosaur? The bones themselves tell us nothing about skin coloration or texture, the exact shape of muscles, or whether the skin had hair or feathers growing on it. The bones don't tell us if the skin was tight, like that of a whippet, or loose, like that of a Chinese shar-pei dog.

The bones alone, don't really tell us whether the animal was beautiful or ugly. Dinosaurs in the books are usually shown as brown or green but who knows, maybe they were purple, pink or had polka dots – the bare bones don't tell us.

But the bones in the skeleton do tell us something about the overall size, mass, and shape of the animal. We can usually figure out whether the animal lived on the land or swam in the ocean. We can usually figure out how the animal moved and perhaps, whether it ate other animals or vegetation, especially if we also can see the jaws and teeth.

In short, the bones can tell us about the *environment* the animal lived in, what was *important* for the animal to survive and thrive.

Such is the case with today's scripture. We can think of it as being a book of instruction, written for new believers in the Christian faith. It contains a set of beliefs, unadorned by the skin and plumage of stories, not just for those in 1st and 2nd century CE, but for us today as well.

In the United Church of Christ, we don't require people to assent to a creed or a set of beliefs. There's plenty of room for a wide range of beliefs. We look to the bible and historical creeds and statements of belief as testimonies, and not as tests of faith.

What are some of these beliefs presented in 1st Peter?

The first belief is that in the same way that *we* were created, in the same way that Jesus was created by a living and loving God. A God that loved humanity enough to come and walk among us, in human form. A God that experienced life in all its fullness, its pain and joy, its challenges and its triumphs. A God that made and makes all things, including the land, sea and skies, and *upon*, and *in* which, all life flourishes.

The core belief, the very *spine* around which these beliefs are built, is that Jesus was resurrected through the power of God after the crucifixion. The word resurrection comes from a Latin word meaning to "rise again" or to "resurge."

Resurrection is not just limited to Jesus; think of African burrowing frogs. They bury themselves in mud before it dries up. They slow their heartbeats and metabolism down greatly so they can survive for the long dry months when the sun scorches the earth. When the rains come, the frogs come back to life, eat, cavort, and breed for just a few days and then bury themselves yet again. But boy, do they have fun for a few days!

The resurrection of Jesus and of frogs in Africa, while interesting and perhaps inspiring, are meaningless if we can't experience the resurrection in our own lives. That's why the belief in the resurrection is the spine, the backbone of Christian beliefs. I believe that the power of the concept of resurrection lies not in a single instance in all of human history, the resurrection of Jesus, but resurrection as a *symbol* of God's promise and love, that life transcends death; and that each one of us can be renewed again and again.

If resurrection is the spine of Christian beliefs, then salvation is the *limbs*, the arms and legs of a good faith. Salvation, to be saved, began with the notion of being saved from original sin, the original sin of Adam and Eve when they ate from the tree of knowledge.

Even if you, as is the case for many of us, don't believe in original sin, there is still plenty of evidence of sin or turning away from God, both in the world and by each of us. All of us do better and have happier lives when we are in alignment with our best selves and our understanding of a moral and good life, what some would call a godly life. Just take the easy example of telling the truth. As Mark Twain said, "if you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."

Faith is the circulatory system, the heart, arteries and veins of a well-functioning belief system. Faith moves nutrients from stores of energy to all the parts of the body that need it to survive. Faith is also the intelligence that looks beyond today to tomorrow and into the distant future, perhaps to the end of time. Our faith guides and sustains us, so perhaps a better description is that faith is the *brain* of a responsive system of beliefs. Our faith is more precious than gold, it is *imperishable*, and our faith grows stronger each time it is challenged.

The last element of the system of beliefs in our scripture, the skin, eyes, and nose of beliefs is the idea that Jesus will return at the end of time and that our souls are connected to his. Our skin, eyes, ears and noses give us a sense of direction and *reason* to live a life that transcends our current challenges. They enable us to look towards the future.

I was intuitively drawn to this text for reasons that I could not fully explain. Let me tell you what I think it means to me and to us, as people and as a church.

I believe that all of our lives, yours and mine, have *meaning* and a *purpose*. You and I have been able to live during some of the best years that humanity has ever had. We are experiencing the limits of what nature can sustain, perhaps we have pushed the boundaries too far, in terms of our consumption of resources and intrusion on the wilderness. We have known for many years that excessive consumption of non-renewable resources, of all kinds, would cause problems, perhaps even with disastrous consequences. We have known for a hundred years that a pandemic could quickly spread around the world. Now, through the gifts of air, sea and land travel, diseases can spread much more quickly than a century ago.

Our faith teaches us that we must pay attention and bring our lives and our society back into alignment with the natural world. The natural world is not ours to conquer. It is a gift from God, to be treasured, as an eternal inheritance that both sustains us now and that will provide us what we need until we each meet God, face to face.

Our faith teaches us that we and everything that exists was created by God. It teaches us, as faithful stewards, to care for that which we have been given, especially each other, those we love, and strangers in distant lands.

Our faith teaches us that humanity can be redeemed. It can be resurrected, brought back from the edge of disaster to new life. If we are wise and look to the fiery pillar of God's will at night and clouds of God's promises by day, we will do more than survive, we will live full lives, marked by love and compassion, for all people, and all life on this tiny blue ball in the heavens.

But sometimes we have to experience a brush with death to know how precious life is. I was held up at gunpoint in a parking lot in Berkeley years ago. I was given the choice of turning over my wallet, keys, and cell phone or being shot. That was an easy choice.

But as frightening as that experience was, I remember thinking, the next morning, "this is the first day of a life I could have lost last night – thank you, God!" and then the next day, "this is the second day of my life, thank you, God!".

I also remember receiving a cancer diagnosis one February. It took awhile to research treatment options and to be scheduled. The very next day after I delivered an Easter sermon and celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, Carol took me to the hospital at 5 am. I had surgery so that I, too, might be saved.

Because I have loved you, some of you have shared your own stories of resurrection with me, stories that I will carry within me, for the rest of my life. You shared your own stories of resurrection and salvation, by God and by family.

But resurrection stories are not limited to individual lives. 15 months ago we began our reVision process, a process that helped us reconnect with our community, a story of resurrection of our church. Today, the coronavirus is helping us remember that a church is not a sanctuary, social hall and a bell tower. Our church is a loving, caring community of people, that exists not only to care for one another, but our community was well.

If we are wise, if we follow the way and light of Jesus, we will create our *next* reVision, our next resurrection out of the heavy cross of physical distancing. That is the new birth that is underway right now, as we stay connected with cards, phone calls, emails, and virtual gatherings. One of the places our resurrection is taking place, is not at the church, but by the schools, as flammable trees are removed from the school site, so that future generations of children will be safe.

The writer of 1st Peter never saw knew or saw Jesus himself. But that didn't prevent him from believing in him and his resurrection. Nor need it prevent us from believing in God's promises to be active in the world.

Jesus lives every time one of you checks on a neighbor, especially those who are most vulnerable, like a man with COPD or a woman in an assisted living facility. Jesus lives as we ask ourselves, how can we as a church, help those who are less fortunate.

The light of Christ will shine ever more brightly as we find creative ways to continue to save our community from challenges and danger, even as we wear our masks and keep safe distances from one another.

We believe in the life, death and resurrection of not only of Jesus but resurrection and renewal in our own lives and that of our church as well. Because of this we can rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy. We are receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls, our church, community and all creation. Thanks be to God! Amen.

(scripture on next page)

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3-9

“A Living Hope”

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, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 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. 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, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.