

**“Not here...but THERE!”**

Dear Friends in Christ:

*The Lord is risen...He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

On this Second Sunday of Easter, the Apostle Peter writes that we are “*born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...a living hope!*” In other words, Easter is not simply a major event that occurred on one day, long ago in a very holy week. No, “*the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*” promises a “*living hope*” - the followers of Jesus assured of “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith.*” (1 Peter 1:3-9)

What a promise from God’s Word, yet Peter alludes, and well knows from his own post-Easter journey, that faith sure does get tested along the way. I love the Apostle’s inspired, descriptive language: “*In this you rejoice though for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.*” What an understatement, as the Book of Acts reveals that as soon as Peter and the other apostles began proclaiming Jesus Savior and Risen Lord, they faced enraged opposition and some wanted to kill them! (Acts 5:29-34) *Happy Easter, right?*

It is a reality check we all face after Easter isn’t it, keeping faith and hope alive “*in the little whiles*” – those moments when various trials seem to pile up and pile on; when things aren’t going so well, when we’re grieving failures and losses. In the midst of daily life challenges, how do we

maintain, as Peter encourages, “*a living hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead?*” It’s such an important faith question, that we need to go back to the empty tomb one more time...one week prior, focusing on the angel’s words:

*“Don’t be alarmed...You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is **not here**. See the place where they laid him. **But** go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. **THERE** you will see him, just as he told you.’”* (Mark 16:6-7)

That announcement changed everything for those faithful followers! The tomb was no longer their ultimate destination! Funeral preparation was no longer their primary purpose! Because if Jesus is “*not here*,” as the angel said - not at the cemetery in Joseph's garden - not bound to the grave – not dead and gone, then they, and we, have to probe the question: “*Where was Jesus if not **HERE**?*” And the angel’s answer: “*He is going ahead of you into Galilee. **THERE** you will see him, just as he told you.*” “**Not here...but THERE!**”

Take note of that phrase because the implications are personal, profound and powerful. “**Jesus is not here...but THERE**” transforms and changes our outlook on life and gives us hope. Think about it, if Jesus is not confined “**here**” in a grave; if the tomb could not hold Him; if the Cross could not defeat Him; if death could not prevent His victory – then it means that Jesus, the Living Lord, the Son of God, as He promised, is always going to be with His followers – and with us - “**out THERE**” – when we do battle with sin; when the “*little whiles*” of life deal difficult blows and setbacks; when sickness and sorrow invade the family circle; when testing and trying times overwhelm and even when we walk with our embalming spices to the graves of loved ones thinking it’s the end!

But it's not, because of a spiritual gem – a nugget of priceless promise tucked in the midst of the familiar Easter Gospel: “*Jesus is risen, He is not here*” because he is already “**THERE**” - ahead of us, waiting to offer “*peace*” even when we are like the disciples that first Easter who were locked behind doors of doubt and fear! Even when we are the faith struggling, brutally honest, “*gotta see it to believe it*” folk! Even when we walk down the Emmaus roads of life depressed and sad because we feel like there is no hope! Note the specificity of the promise: “*He is going ahead of you into Galilee. THERE you will see him, just as he told you!*” “**Not here...but THERE!**”

So, I looked up “*Galilee*” on a Bible map, trying to understand why God led the angel to identify that region. I discovered that the distance from the garden tomb outside Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee is about 70 miles. Bethlehem, Bethany and Bethphage are 1 – 6 miles; Caesarea, Caesarea Philippi and Capernaum range from 57 – 105 miles. Emmaus is 16 miles, the Jordan River 21 miles and to go from Jerusalem to Nazareth is about 65 miles. So instead of being confined “*here*” in a rock-hewn sepulchre, the Jesus is now “*out THERE*” in “**Galilee,**” connecting the Risen Lord with all the places where His followers lived and walked and struggled, reminding them, and us, of the promise: “*I will be with you always, [wherever you live and serve and follow] even to the close of the age.*” (Matthew 28:20) Wow! Do you get it? “**He's not here...but THERE**” – everywhere we are, living, alive, present in every “*Galilee*” where we live and walk and serve and pray and struggle and follow! “**Not here...but THERE!**”

So, I wonder today, where is your “*Galilee*” – or mine, the place where we need to believe and trust that Jesus Christ, the Crucified, Risen and victorious Lord is already “**THERE**” –

promising to be “*with us*” and see us “*through?*” Is your “*Galilee*” a locked and lonely room, an isolated place where you feel like nobody cares or truly understands your problems and struggles? Is your “*Galilee*” an ailing parent or spouse, a loved one or friend whose mind and body are on swift decline, and the sadness you feel just overwhelms sometimes? Is your “*Galilee*” a son or daughter or friend not embracing the faith anymore, questioning and doubting this Jesus thing, headed off on some weird spiritual track or none at all because they think yours is a fraud, a fake and a forgery? Is your “*Galilee*” a dysfunctional family, a re-occurring sin, a purposeless job, a broken marriage, a financial struggle, a grief that weighs heavy on your heart, a boring life or just an emptiness that breaks your soul and spirit day after day? Well, Jesus is **THERE**, in the midst of all the “*little whites,*” the angel of God announcing to brokenhearted and struggling followers of all time: “*He is going ahead of you into Galilee. THERE you will see him, just as he told you.*” “**Not here...but THERE!**”

The “*living hope*” of Easter my friends, comes down to a singular promise that God keeps making in His Word over and over again about His presence in our lives...no matter what! It is a call to service and witness and faith and trust because God didn't send His Son to die on a cross and rise from the grave so that we would go on living defeated and hopeless lives! No, in fact, the very purpose of the Bible, as John concludes in today's Gospel is this:

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have **LIFE** in his name.* (John 20:30-31)

That's my prayer, my hope for you today, claiming anew an Easter faith which believes the angel's promise: "*He is not here. He is risen. He is going ahead of you into [your] Galilee. THERE you will see him, just as He told you.*" "**Not here...but THERE** – calling you and me to faith and trust, offering life, hope and peace!

*The Lord is risen...He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

- Sermon by Rev. Preston E. Wagner