

Living God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe and believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen. 1 Peter 1:3-9
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

A Living Hope

3 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, **4** and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, **5** who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. **6** In this you rejoice,[a] even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, **7** 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. **8** Although you have not seen[b] 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, **9** for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Building the House of Love/Part I: Hope

Fear is a part of our lives.

A few years ago, I had an experience that resulted in one of those heart pumping, adrenaline racing experiences of fear. I used to be a member of a group of people who walked at 5 a.m. We met at the Bona Dea Trail in Russellville on most weekdays, year round. And most of the year it is dark at that time of day. But, we were not afraid. I think we even wore a badge of honor, both for getting up that early and for going out into the woods and around the water that make up the Bona Dea trail in the dark. But there is one more thing about the trail that you may or may not have heard about, and that is the Bona Dea alligator. There really is an alligator that lives there -- it is not a myth or an urban legend. One day as my friend and I walked past one of the ponds, we heard a loud crashing coming through the woods - it sounded like a herd of deer running across the trail right in front of us----- in the dark. We stopped dead in our tracks to let whatever it was pass. But then.....we heard it slide down the bank of the pond, and then we heard **the --- loudest** splash I think I have ever heard. In my memory it was like a bomb had been dropped in that pond. And our response was immediate. We turned, and we ran as fast as we could. I promise-- you have never seen two fifty-year old women run so fast. We could have made the Razorback track team!

Fear is not always a bad thing.

Fear can be life saving. I think it was a good response to run from that alligator. And for instance, I think it is a good response to follow health guidelines during this pandemic.

But fear can also be life sucking.

These days fear seems to be draining the life out of all of us.

And so, today we do the hard work of packing up all our stuff and moving out of a house of fear and into a house of hope. Today is the beginning of a new sermon series called “Building the House of Love.” Over the next few weeks, we will be digging into the book of 1 Peter to think about what it means to live Easter lives. You see Easter is not just one day, Easter is a way of life. Jesus rose from the grave, and he is still alive! And so the question for us becomes how

do we live in this world marked by fear, hatred and violence and not be destroyed by it? The question becomes how do we build a spiritual house whose foundation is our living God, and how do we get to the point that our spiritual house is filled with the love and hope and joy of the resurrection?

This sermon series is based on a quote from theologian Henri Nouwen's book *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying With Icons*. If you're looking for an interesting read - you can download this and learn about praying with icons - you can even see pictures of the beautiful icons that inspired Henri Nouwen to write this book. Listen carefully to what he says:

How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred, and violence, and not be destroyed by it? The spiritual life keeps us aware that our true house is not the house of fear, in which the powers of hatred and violence rule, but the house of love, where God resides.

How do we live in the house of love where God resides?

Unfortunately, fear is a house that we tend to inhabit more often than a house of love. Fear abounds in our world. I think we have all felt like we have alligators chasing us at times!

The very first Christians that Peter was writing to in 1 Peter must have had some intense fears of their own. You see, 1 Peter was a letter written to several churches in Asia; it was addressed to Jesus followers who were Gentiles -- they weren't Jewish people who had decided to follow Jesus. They were people who were part of an entirely new way of life. They were trying to figure out what it meant to live in the house of God, so to speak - they were learning who Christ was and what the resurrection meant to them personally. They were learning what it looked like to live in the world, but follow after Jesus. They must have been afraid of what their friends and family would think of this new way of life. They must have feared being persecuted for their beliefs and their faith.

And Peter writes to calm their fears.....to urge them to faith.... and to encourage them to keep their focus on Christ. Now, Peter's perspective is very interesting. Peter has had some previous experience with fear. You may remember Peter's role in the last days of Christ. After Jesus was arrested Peter denied even knowing Jesus even though he had literally only hours earlier proclaimed him as Lord. When Jesus was resurrected and began appearing to his followers, guess where he found Peter and the others? They were locked away--they were hiding -- because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. They were afraid that they would be arrested and executed as followers of Jesus. And it wasn't until Peter saw the risen Christ that everything changed for him. It was his experience with the living God that transformed Peter and empowered Peter to share this hope and love far and wide. So, Peter's words in this letter had deep meaning to those believers who lived long ago. And Peter's words have deep meaning for us today -- as we experience fear maybe like we've never experienced before.

I've made a new friend during the isolation of the pandemic by email. And he has shared some amazing stories with me by email over the last couple of weeks. And I couldn't help but think about the fear he must have experienced over his lifetime. He talked to me about going through the Great Depression and World War II. He told me about serving in the Korean War and that half of his senior class was drafted. And several of his classmates were killed in the war. That is a lot of trauma to experience. That is a lot of fear to work through. And I asked my

friend how these events in his life compared to the pandemic we are experiencing now. He said, "I think we have less hope now than at any time before."

So, now more than ever, I urge you to hear the hope in today's scripture. Peter begins his letter by praising God. He says:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

And then Peter reminds the churches about the main thing; he reminds them about the event that so transformed his life. He writes:

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

It is this Easter living that Peter is talking about -- it is the fact that Jesus lives that gave Peter new birth--his experience with the risen Lord has transformed him from a person hiding out in fear to a person overflowing with living hope! And the resurrection creates in us the same living hope!

Peter talks about the hope and assurance that one day we will receive our inheritance in heaven -- when we seek out God's presence, we will be granted the hope and assurance that we are being protected by the power of God because of our faith--not that we won't experience fear or face danger -- but that through our faith we are promised God's presence in our lives, and we are even ultimately promised the salvation of our souls - our own resurrection!

And in his letter Peter brags on the people -- he says that their faith is genuine -- that their faith is like gold-- that while they may be tested with trials in their lives, **when they keep their faith through those trials their very lives bring praise and glory and honor to Jesus Christ.** And you know what, that is the kind of life I want to live -- one that brings praise and glory and honor to Jesus! Peter goes on to brag on the people because they haven't even seen Jesus like he has, yet they love Jesus, and they believe in Jesus, and they rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy!

And so, perhaps the greatest antidote to our great fear is to seek out our great God who is love and who **gives** hope!

Well, I have always thought my experience in the darkness of the Bona Dea Trail was an encounter with the alligator. But I have to be honest, just yesterday, I started thinking that the whole thing with the alligator happened during the winter--it was cold. And alligators can't even move when it's cold. I started thinking maybe it was really a beaver instead of an alligator. And maybe the effect of the experience was amplified because it was so dark.

How different might this encounter have been in the light? Even with a little light, it would have been a whole different kind of experience. And so my thinking is that when we face fear, perhaps the solution is to shed a little light on the situation. Maybe we need to open up the windows and the doors of our spiritual house to let the light of Christ shine in on us. In fact, maybe our house needs to be flooded with the light of Christ -- and maybe we need to seek out the love of Christ and the hope of the resurrection like we never have before. And maybe part of building a house of love even involves just blowing the roof of the house with our praise and celebration of God's love so that we can really let God's light into our lives.

So I have a very specific challenge for us to try this week. I think it will help us build our spiritual house as a house of love and maybe it will help us eliminate our fear. You might think of it as a tool to help the building process. What I want to suggest is that you dig into scripture

this week. Would you open up your Bible or just google it. Find out what God says about fear. And then hang on to that good word that you find this week--read it over and over -- choose one verse and say it over and over--memorize it. And then don't just keep it to yourself because all the people you know could use a little light this week, too. Would you share what you find this week -- whatever scripture you find that brings you hope and casts out fear, would you post it on your facebook page and tag the church or tag me. Would you be intentional this week and allowing God's word to shine light on the fear in your life?

You never know.

You might learn that God's perfect love will cast out your fear. (1 John 4:18)

You might learn that God didn't give us a spirit of fear, but instead one of power and love and of a sound mind. (2 Tim 1:7)

You might learn about angels who appeared to people and said, "Don't be afraid. Because God is with you."

You might learn to be strong and courageous because God is with you wherever we go. (Joshua 1:9)

You might even learn that when you seek God out, God will answer, and God will deliver you from your fears. (Psalm 34:4)

I pray this day, risen Lord, that each of us would allow you to work within us through this process of building up our spiritual houses. May our spiritual lives become so strong that we realize our fears pale in comparison to the overwhelming love that you have for us. Holy One, teach us to do the work of building a house of love. And may the Holy Spirit shine the light of Christ's love upon us and cast out our fear.

Let us love the risen Lord.

Let us believe in the risen Lord.

Let us rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Benediction

May the risen Lord bless you with genuine faith more precious than gold

May the risen Lord shine light on all your fears

May you rejoice in his love each and every day.

Amen.