

“Imperishable”

Reading: John 20:19-31; 1 Peter 1:3-9

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I've mentioned to you before that it is evidence of God's enjoyment of the ironic that I now, as an adult, have a secret enjoyment of antique shops. My parents dragged me into what seemed like countless and endless antique shops as a child, and I hated it, but now, much to Pastor Carey's chagrin, I sometimes have that glimmer of hope when passing by an antique shop, thinking that just maybe I'll find that perfect hidden treasure in there somewhere. Some of you surely have some antiques in your homes, and maybe a few family heirlooms that have come to you from generations past. If that's true of you, you probably have some sense of what separates an antique from something that is merely old: antiques have some sense of value to them, whether it's monetary value or something less tangible. Heirlooms have that added value of sentiment and family history.

And the difference doesn't necessarily come from what condition the object is in. Something may look like a used-up, beat-up piece of old junk to an untrained eye, but those who know what to look for can tell when an object preserves something of value regardless of its external condition. We have our everyday things of life, especially in today's throwaway culture, that get used up and beat up and broken and thrown away, but then there are special things, valuable things, meaningful things, that we take care of and we polish and we put on a shelf because we value them, and they therefore last longer. And this is the key difference for us today: the things that resist the ravages of time do so because of some inherent value. A dining room chair from Ikea gets used up and thrown away; a rare example of fine historical craftsmanship gets placed in a museum and admired, hopefully for many generations. And when we're talking about physical objects like furniture or cars, that's usually the choice we have to make. You either use it until it's used up, or you set it in a special place and protect it from being used so that you can preserve it.

If we follow the analogy, this is kind of at the core of the question being wrestled with in the book of 1 Peter. We've got to get this in our heads, because we're going to be spending this season of Eastertide, these weeks between Easter and Pentecost, working our way through Peter's message in this book. He's writing to Christians who have heard and received the message that Jesus is alive. They've had their questions answered, and like Thomas and the other disciples in those days after the resurrection, they know that He's really, truly, completely alive — He's not a ghost, He's not just some intangible spirit, He's not just alive in our memories or in our hearts, and He's not just alive as some philosophical ideal. He has physically defeated death and is even more alive than we are; He's eternally alive, living in a way that is characterized by eternity. They understand that He has included them in His mission and has invited them to continue in His resurrection. He has given them an eternal value, an inheritance, an heirloom of His kingdom that makes them part of the family.

But Peter is responding to their struggles, and what they're struggling with is essentially this: as heirlooms of Christ, as people who have eternal value, how do we respond to the reality that we are living in a junkyard? And this is one of the questions for the ages in the church; we always struggle with our place after Easter — when we encounter the risen Christ, we are different, and yet the world stays the same, and so what do we do? We are revealed as priceless artifacts, given inestimable value, and yet we find ourselves living in a junkyard with all its sources of corruption: there's rust and dirt, there's rain and sun, there's grunge and grime and rats and hulking wrecks piled on top. It's the sort

of environment where it seems corrosion is inevitable, and we wonder what that means as people who have been redeemed by that which is more valuable than silver or gold.

Please understand that in this analogy I am not suggesting that the world is pure junk or that those who are not yet Christians are pure junk. Jesus gave His priceless blood to save this creation because God made it and loves it and wants it redeemed, and most of all He came to seek those who are lost. But the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ inaugurated a new kingdom right in the midst of the old, and His resurrection in particular changed the meaning of life and death, and so we are in this awkward position of living a new life while the old life is still going; we live catching glimpses of eternity before eternity has been fully revealed. And so we feel out of place; holy people don't quite fit in an unredeemed world. In fact, if we read the first few verses of 1 Peter, we find out that Peter is writing "to God's elect, *exiles* scattered throughout the provinces" all over that part of the world. And that's an image he maintains throughout the book, that Christians are a peculiar people living as exiles or sojourners or resident aliens who live in this world but have their citizenship in another. Even by referring to them as "God's elect," Peter is hinting at this status of being separate.

And so they're realizing that this awkward position is presenting them with struggles. How ought they to live out their holy calling in a world that is often hostile to holiness? What's more, it becomes clear as the book goes on that these Christians are facing a sort of latent persecution in their culture; they may not be physically attacked, but they're being slandered and discriminated against. And yet Christ has been raised from the dead! So what do we do when we're living in the junkyard? Maybe we should leave the junkyard altogether and move to a museum that is fit for objects of value such as ourselves. Withdraw from the messy world and its corrupting, hostile influences, in other words, and maybe go live a secluded life in a Christian compound all by ourselves. Or maybe we should get rid of the junkyard, and be a little more proactive. Maybe we should throw the junk out and allow none of its contaminating grime in.

But Peter allows them neither of those options. The verses we read today are the introduction to what Peter has to say in the rest of the book, and from the start he emphasizes our "*living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" that is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." That's the sort of language he uses again and again in this letter to describe the work Christ has done in us. It is of exceeding value, more valuable than the most precious gold, and it is imperishable; it will outlast anything else on earth. And so there is this paradoxical reality to our salvation: it is a *living* hope, not a static one, one that is in the process of being revealed, and so life sequestered in a museum is no good for it, and it is also, or at least it should be, imperishable, and so we remain untouched by the corrosive influences of the junkyard. We have to remain in the junkyard, and yet we have to remain uncorrupted by it.

Being imperishable means that we are no longer able to be touched by death; we are *not* perishable. The corrosion and grime of life in the junkyard won't defile us, and the junkyard rats might gnaw, but they can't mar. But the point of this imperishable work of Christ in us is not just that death can't touch us because we're hard and immovable like a giant rock, it's that death can't touch us because we're so *alive* in the presence of Christ. The point of being undefiled is not that we would obsess over any spot of dirt that gets near us, the point of being undefiled is to be beautiful with the transforming grace of God. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control — this essence of Christlikeness that is holiness is something that is actively lived out.

Holiness does not consist of getting spiritually cleaned up and polished so we can sit on a shelf and be admired. It is lived out toward one another in the context of the junkyard.

Maybe it will help us if we shift our analogy out of the junkyard and into the realm of organisms. Every one of us lives in the midst of countless critters trying to eat us. The scary ones aren't the bears and coyotes, they're viruses and bacteria. They're all around us and even inside us, and they can do horrible things to us. One way to protect yourself from them is to put a sterile barrier between you and them, so you can wear gloves and a mask and even a full hazmat suit to shield you from them. The bad thing, of course, is that if you let your guard down and your barrier gets a hole in it, you're in trouble. Sometimes we need those barriers in special cases, but on the whole, there's a better option. Our bodies have amazing abilities to fight off infections, and so, rather than isolating ourselves from threats, it's better to have a strong immune system that can deal with them when they come. And so we make sure we get the right vaccines and we eat well and sleep well and exercise to be healthy so that we can stay healthy. The ideal is not that we would keep the world away from us lest it contaminate us, the ideal is that we would be able to live in the world in a healthy way.

The temptation has always been to isolate ourselves from the threat of contamination and put barriers between ourselves and those who are sick, but that's not how to live when you have a *living* hope. Likewise, on the other extreme, the temptation can be to proclaim that we're the healthy ones, so sick people ought to act exactly like us in spite of their sickness. But that's not really living with a *living* hope, either.

There is certainly mystery in this. Peter is delightfully vague in some of his verb tenses related to how this salvation works. There is past salvation: God has already done this work of resurrection in Christ, and He has already offered us new birth into this living hope, and He has already set aside an inheritance for His children. There is ongoing, present salvation: the inheritance is kept in heaven, and our faith is being proven through our response to our sufferings, and we love and trust Christ even though we have not seen Him. There is salvation that is yet to come: the inheritance has yet to be fully given, and the fullness of salvation will be revealed in the last time. Peter says, "*you are receiving* the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." Are we receiving it now, or have we secured it for the future, or have we already received it? He doesn't answer all our questions.

The point is that though we do not claim to understand everything, the bodily, eternal resurrection of Jesus Christ has forever altered the nature and quality of our lives. He gives us a living hope, a hope that is both alive and is for living. The result is that we can live in the midst of a decaying world with the knowledge that redemption is possible, and that God has not abandoned what He has made, and that He is able and willing to protect us with His power until His work is revealed in its fullness in the last time. That doesn't mean that we'll never face trouble and we'll never be hurt, but it does mean that regardless of the trouble and hurt, our hope is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. The work of Christ is more sure than the corroding wrecks that litter our world.

As we work our way through the book of 1 Peter in the next several weeks, we will continue to encounter Jesus Christ in the gospels, and we will explore in greater detail what this living hope means for us today. But in the meantime, we know that Christ has conquered death and has offered us a place in His eternal kingdom; He has granted us an inheritance with Him. He has given us the

living hope of being children of the King, and our value to God in Christ cannot be bought with all the gold and silver in the world. We have reason to rejoice and persevere.



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