

## **“Is it Safe to Go Out?”**

I Peter 1:3-9

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The Woodside Church

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On March 15, 2020 the corona virus forced us to shut down worship in our building. Back then it felt like a stone sealed each one of us inside a tomb. Yet three days later, on March 18, there was a miracle. At 3:35 pm Eloise Jane Hoglund was born to my son Peter and daughter-in-law Jackie. Eloise just celebrated her first birthday. Think of it: the coronavirus has been around her entire life. Imagine for a moment how the world looks from her point of view.

- For months she thought the entire population of earth is 5 humans and 2 cats.
- When she finally saw more humans they had no smile or even a mouth.
- All supplies are magically dropped on her doorstep and for some reason those packages have a smile.
- Like her cousin Evelyn, Ellie believes her Grandpa is a famous star because he’s on TV every Sunday morning.
- She realizes her mom is not losing her mind when she talks to herself. She’s just having a parent-teacher conference.
- A dozen years from now, Eloise will belong to a very exclusive club. She’ll be a Quaran-teen.
- And thanks to technology, she doesn’t need to learn to walk. Ellie can relax and ride a Roomba.

This crazy year must make Eloise wonder why in the world she came into this world.

After a year of Covid you may be wondering if you want to enter the world again. Is it safe to go out? Yes more people are getting vaccinated. Yes we are starting to emerge from a dark winter. Yes the stone is being rolled back, but when we come out of our caves, what will we find? Will students struggle because they lost a year of learning? Will closed businesses be able to reopen? Will the unemployed find work? Will our crippled economy ever recover? Will racial tensions ever be reconciled? Will the high spikes of anxiety and the deep valleys of depression ever level out? Will struggling marriages and families survive the pandemic? Will the many who lost loved ones find a way to live with their grief? Will we even want to get together again or has Covid trained us to stay isolated? Is it safe to go out?

That’s the question on Peter’s mind while he hides in the upper room. A few nights ago in the same room he promised to stand by Jesus to the death. Yet within hours he denies he knows the guy ... three times. When Peter realizes what he has done, he runs into the darkness and weeps bitterly. Now his Master is locked in the tomb and Peter hides behind locked doors with the other disciples. They socially distance themselves from Jesus. They practice the original quarantine. They have lost all hope. Even when Peter visits the grave early Sunday morning and finds no body, they still cower behind closed doors the whole first Easter. They still wonder: Is it safe to go out? Then...

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. John 20:19-20

Is it safe to go out? Yes because on Easter Jesus came in! The Resurrection means we can have God’s unstoppable Hope. Covid has caused uncomfortable isolation, unbearable loss and an uncertain future. In every way it’s been an uneasy year. But now is your time to live again. If you let Jesus come into your life, you can shake off the darkness. Roll back the stone of fear. Step into the Light. Hope is Rising!

Jesus wants to give you a *New Birth*. Peter writes, “Praise be to the God and Father our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy He has given us new birth” (I Peter 1:3). Today your life can have a new beginning that goes on forever. This new birth is not a physical birth, as my Granddaughter Eloise had a year ago. It’s a spiritual birth into a heavenly family – God’s family. Peter knows what it means to be reborn. Some days after the Resurrection, the old fisherman is still ashamed. Jesus looks into his downcast eyes and says “Take care of my sheep” (John 21:16) three times – one for every time Peter denied Jesus. In that moment Peter is redeemed, resurrected and reborn.

Many years later, Peter writes a letter, called First Peter, to some new believers who live in what we call Turkey today. These newborn believers are isolated, harassed and persecuted. Because of their faith in Jesus their families turn them out and their neighbors turn them in to the authorities. They are losing hope and wondering if it is safe to go out. Peter is in Rome. He’s probably behind another locked door. This time he is in jail for preaching the Good News about Jesus. Yet this time He is filled with the hope he received that first Easter. If you give your life to Christ, he will give you a New Birth. According to Peter, that New Birth comes with three gifts.

First, our New Birth gives us a *Living Hope*.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead I Peter 1:3.

For a Christian, the word hope is not just wishful thinking as when a wife says, “I hope he’ll do the laundry.” That may never happen. That’s a dead hope. Jesus gives us a *Living Hope* – it is a solid conviction, a 100% guarantee that God will be with us in this life and we will be with God in the next. We know for certain the sun will rise tomorrow because we saw it rise a thousand times before. Peter saw the Son of God rise and it filled him with a living hope that God has beaten sin and death. He has the power to keep His promises and that sets us free.

During World War II, American and British P.O.W.s were separated in a German camp by a high wire fence. The Americans had a small concealed handmade radio

and were able to get news from the outside. Then one prisoner would go to the fence and share it with the Brits. One day, news came over the radio that the German high command surrendered and the war was over. When the news was passed through the fence a roar of celebration rose up. Life in the camp was transformed. Men walked around singing, shouting, waving to the guards and even laughing at the dogs. When the German guards finally heard the news three nights later, they fled into the dark, leaving the gates unlocked. The next morning, the Brits and Americans walked out as free men. Yet they were truly set free three days earlier by the news that the war was over.<sup>1</sup>

Christ's Kingdom is not yet here. Yet we know He already won the war against sin and death on Easter. We know because He rose to life. That gives us a living hope. You won't be crushed by corona or any other circumstances when you are filled with a living hope.

Second, our New Birth gives us a *Lasting Inheritance*. Peter writes,

He has given us a new birth ... into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you. I Peter 1:3-4

When you think about it, we invest so much of our lives in earning and gathering possessions and wealth. Nothing wrong with that except we all know those things eventually rot, fade or get thrown out. Worst of all, sometimes our possessions possess us. Much of our stress comes from getting, storing, fixing and disposing of stuff. And at the end of life we can't take it with us. Someone has said, "It's tragic when a person has plenty to live on but nothing to live for."

Stuff is good but it's not supposed to be our God. When we focus on stuff we miss the incredible inheritance God has for us. Eloise's big brother Benjamin is 8. Six years ago he was sitting in bed watching Disney Jr. on TV. His parents came in and said, "Okay Ben it's time to go." And being 2 years old he said, "No." "Come on Ben don't you want to go?" He was happy watching Disney Jr. and said, "No." No matter how hard his parents tried to pry him away from Disney Jr. he just said, "No." Now where was Ben watching Disney Jr.? In Disney World. He would rather cling to a two-dimensional picture of Disney world than go enjoy the real kingdom his parents planned for him.

The stuff in this world is just a two-dimensional copy of real joy, real life and real love. Your Heavenly Father has a wonderful Kingdom planned for you. When you believe that, it changes the way you live in this world. You stop clutching and clinging to the stuff in this world. You stop rushing and racing for things that don't last. Why? You know for certain you have a lasting inheritance, an incredible abundance of blessings that will never perish, spoil or fade. It's not a kingdom of money or stuff. It's a kingdom filled with the blessings that really matter: peace, contentment, strength, joy and love. That gives you hope. Those are the only things that last. Best of all: eternal life begins now. Start enjoying your lasting inheritance today.

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<sup>1</sup> Story from Ralph Bakke

And third, Peter says our New Birth surrounds us with the *Loving Power* of God. He writes, you “are shielded by God’s power until the coming of salvation” (I Peter 1:5). Peter knows suffering and trials are a part of life. Being a Christian does not mean your life will be smooth and easy. You may even pass through more fires than before. God does not promise us a painless life. Instead He offers us His power to face the pain. You would think the wife of Evangelist Billy Graham, Ruth Bell Graham, would have an easy life since she was a strong Christian. Yet she went through twists and turns, detours and dead ends. Still, the one thing Ruth always counted on is the loving power of God to help her face every painful pothole on the road. Ruth even saw God use those difficult moments to build her into a better person. She once said,

I saw a sign on a strip of highway once that I would like to have copied on my gravestone. It said, "End of construction. Thank you for your patience."

And that’s exactly what her gravestone says.

What will your gravestone say? What will they say about you after you are gone? “Stored up a lot of stuff.” “Always beat the competition.” “Difficult to live with.” “Left a trail of hurt relationships.” “Tried to control others.” “Never got sober.” “Never let anyone get close.” That doesn’t have to be your story. Today you can have a new birth, a new beginning. It’s not too late. Today, if you place your life in Jesus’ hands, He will fill you with a living hope, a lasting inheritance, a loving power.

I want to help you start your new birth. Today Woodside begins 75 Days of Prayer, Praise, Study and Service in celebration of our 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. During these days we want to help Hope Rise in your soul. Join us each Sunday as we learn more about God’s unstoppable Hope from the First letter of Peter. Go to our website or APP and grab the 75 Day calendar which contains a daily prayer and short reading from the Book of Acts. Discover how the Rising Hope of Jesus spread across the Roman Empire. While you’re on our APP or website sign up for a Growth Group or Microchurch. These small gatherings – on zoom or in person – are a great way to receive Hope every week.

Let me tell you how hope rose in the soul of dear saint of Woodside named Carol Armento. Carol told me she used to be a lukewarm Christian just going through the motions. While she sat in the pew each Sunday her mind focused on what she was going to buy at the grocery store after church. When her daughter Cherie started Confirmation in 1998 I asked the students to read the Gospel of Mark. Carol decided to read the Gospel with Cherie every night. Around the same time, Carol was diagnosed with cancer. As she went through her treatments she also received daily shots of hope from God’s Word and it changed her life. When she was given a clean bill of health, Carol resolved never to go back. No more lukewarm Christian. She was on fire with unstoppable hope.

She started attending Bible study and then leading two Bible studies. She rallied our whole church to study the Purpose Driven Life which launched thirty-five Bible studies. Carol joined our Staff and helped people discover and use their Spiritual Gifts in various ministries. Usually 20% of the people in church do 80% of the work. Carol got

80% involved in ministry. Through several campaigns she moved the congregation to give so we could grow the home of Woodside to be what it is today. Carol hated public speaking but she was always the first person to pray out loud during worship. When other people felt down, Carol was at their side to give them hope. Even during Covid she often called to let me know of members who were sick or struggling.

Then came the call this January that Carol was not well. After twenty-three years of good health she once again faced cancer. When I called her in the hospital Carol told me what the doctors found. I knew it was not good. She knew it as well. Yet there was not a hint of fear or doubt in her voice. She simply said, "My faith is strong. I am in God's hands." The end came quickly. The last time I spoke with Carol, her voice was weak but her spirit strong. "I'm ready to go be with Jesus and I know He will watch over everyone I love." Less than 48 hours later, surrounded by her family, Carol received her inheritance – the hope of living forever with Jesus. If you want to receive the same new birth Jesus won for Carol, me and you, if you want God's hope to rise up in your soul, then join me in the traditional Easter greeting:

He is Risen!

He is Risen indeed!