

**“Spoiler Alert”**

I Peter 1:3-9

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The Woodside Church

Easter, April 5, 2014

Brothers and sisters, it is with a heavy heart, I must ask you to join me in observing the passing of a great American icon. I noticed the following obituary:

On March 29th, the Pillsbury Doughboy died of a yeast infection and complications due to repeated pokes in the belly. He was 71.

Doughboy, as he was affectionately called by his schoolmate Little Debbie, was buried in a lightly greased coffin. Dozens of celebrities turned out to pay their respects, including Mrs. Butterworth, Hungry Jack, the California Raisins, Betty Crocker, the Hostess Twinkies and Captain Crunch. The graveside was piled high with flours.

Long-time friend, Aunt Jemima, delivered the eulogy. She described Doughboy as a man who never knew how much he was kneaded. Doughboy rose quickly in show business, but his later life was filled with turnovers. He was not considered a very “smart cookie,” wasting much of his dough on half-baked schemes. Yet despite being a little flaky at times, he was still, even as a crusty old man, considered a roll model for millions.

Toward the end, many of his devoted followers thought he would rise again, but this time, when they opened the tube, he didn’t pop out.

Doughboy is survived by his wife, Play Dough, two children: John Dough and Jane Dough, plus one in the oven. He is also survived by his elderly father: Pop Tart. The funeral was held Thursday, April 2 at 3:50, for about twenty minutes.

I have officiated at a number of funerals over the last twenty-nine years. Some might consider this the worst task a pastor must do. But I do not. It is one of the most sacred parts of my calling. When I come alongside a family going through the pain and grief of losing a loved one, when I offer God’s comfort and hope, then I am standing on holy ground. It’s one of the moments when I am certain Jesus is there. The Lord, our Shepherd, promises to be with us when we walk through that valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23). And I count it an honor to be the one to sum up a life in the funeral message. It is a privilege to write the last chapter in someone’s life story. Believe it or not, healthy people in the prime of life actually come up to me and say, “I want you to do my funeral.” Now what do you say to such a request? “Great! I’m really looking forward to it.” “Can I schedule you for next month?”

Funerals are moments when we ask the big questions. Where did my loved one go? Why did she have to die? How am I going to go on without him? How can I bear this grief and sadness? It’s also a time to examine what we believe. Is there a God? Is He kind or cruel? Does He care at all? Is there life after death or is this all there is? If there is a heaven, how do I get there? It’s also a time to take a look at your life story. Where have I

been? Where am I going? What is the purpose of my life? How much time do I have left to accomplish it? What will they say about me at my funeral?

When you review your life story you discover funerals are not the only time a death occurs. A teenager going through a breakup can tell you about a broken heart. A patient lying in the hospital bed fears she will never be healthy again. The person who has cleaned out his desk worries there may not be another desk waiting for him. The parent whose child is on drugs or held in a prison can describe the death of the innocence they once saw in the wide eyes of a toddler. And the spouse leaving divorce court may grieve for the love once promised on the wedding day. In such moments, security dies, innocence dies, dreams die. Faith, hope and love die. Unresolved conflicts. Unexpected twists. Unforeseen surprises. These may be entertaining in a movie, but not when they appear in your life story.

Peter knows all those feelings intimately. He is willing to die for Jesus. He says so at the Passover Dinner. But then everything goes terribly wrong. The priests and the soldiers move quickly to capture Jesus. In less than twenty-four hours, the so called Messiah is tried, whipped, executed and buried. The plot twists so fast there isn't even time for a funeral. But that doesn't matter, since none of Jesus' disciples would have shown up for it – not James or John, Matthew or Thomas. And Peter? The one who promises to stand by Jesus to the death, denies he's ever heard of the guy ... three times. When Peter realizes what he has done, he runs into the darkness and weeps bitterly. All his dreams of glory, all his hopes for salvation die when they seal his beloved Master in the stone cold tomb. The story is over.

Then, at dawn on Sunday the unthinkable happens. Brothers and sisters I know we are reading The Story together, I know we are only a third of the way through this chronological version of the Bible, but I have to give you a spoiler alert. If you don't want me to spoil the STORY for you, cover your ears...for the rest of this sermon. The whole STORY is moving toward this one incredible climax: on that Sunday morning, Jesus rose again! (Bet you didn't see that coming.) Peter, who ran away from Jesus' cross, now races to Jesus' tomb and finds it empty. Later that evening, the still fearful disciples are hiding in a locked room when their Master suddenly stands in their midst. He is not bloody and battered but radiant, glorious and very much alive. What does it all mean? How does the plot twist in Jesus' story change your life story and mine?

Jesus gives us 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). Our life stories get a new start, a new beginning for a life that goes on forever. This new birth is not a physical birth but a spiritual birth. Not a birth into an earthly family, but into a heavenly family – God's family. Peter knows well what it means to be reborn. Some days after the Resurrection, Jesus looks into the downcast eyes of Peter and says "Take care of my sheep" (John 21:16). He says it not once but three times – once for every time Peter denied Jesus. At that moment Peter is redeemed, resurrected and reborn.

Peter spends the rest of his life telling the story about Jesus. Many years later, Peter writes a letter to some new believers who live in what is today the country of

Turkey. Their life stories tell a tale of harassment and persecution. Because of their faith in Jesus their families turn them out and their neighbors turn them in to the authorities. They are about to give up their beliefs. Peter is probably in jail in Rome for preaching the Good News about Jesus. Yet despite all the twists and turns in his life story, despite all the sacrifice and suffering, nothing dims the joy he's felt since that first Easter.

If you are facing the death of something or someone, then I invite you to cling to these powerful words. Here is a spoiler alert on your life story. God has a different story in store for you. Your life story is about to get better if you grab hold of Jesus the way Peter did. On Easter Sunday, we see the greatest plot twist in history: all our defects and death are defeated when Jesus rises from the grave. If He can do that, there are no twists in your life story He can't untangle. If you give your life to Christ, then 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. But Jesus gives us a *Living Hope* – it is a solid conviction, a 100% guarantee that God will keep his promises. 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.

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 has not yet fully come. Yet He already won the battle against sin and death on Easter. And that gives us a living hope. You won't be crushed by the twists in your life story when you face them with a living hope.

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

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, making and gathering possessions and wealth. There’s nothing so bad about that except that sooner or later, those things rot, fade, spoil or get thrown out. Worst of all, sometimes they possess us. And at the end of our life stories we can’t take a single bit with us. Someone has said, “The world is full of people who are making a good living but living poor lives. It’s tragic when a person has plenty to live on but nothing to live for.”

Yet we still cling to our stuff and miss the incredible inheritance God has for us. My grandson Benjamin is 2 ½ years old. Recently 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.

This world is just a poor 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 clinging and clutching 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 waiting for you in the next world. It’s not a kingdom of money or stuff. It’s a kingdom filled with the blessings that really matter: blessings of peace, contentment, strength, hope, joy and love. Those are the only things that last. Best of all: eternal life begins now. You can start enjoying your lasting inheritance today.

And third, Peter teaches us that 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” (v. 5). Peter knows that grief, suffering and trials are a part of life. No one should ever think that being a Christian means your life story will be smooth and easy. You may even pass through more fires than before. God does not promise us a painless life story. Instead He offers us His power to face the pain. You would think that the wife of Evangelist Billy Graham, Ruth Bell Graham, would have an easy life since she was a strong Christian. Yet her life story went through twists and turns, detours and dead ends. Still, the one thing she could always count on is the loving power of God to help her face every painful pothole on the road. Ruth even saw how God used 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 your life story 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 in.” That doesn’t have to be your story. Today you can have a new birth, a new start, a new beginning. It’s not too late. Today, if you place your life in Jesus’ hands, He will begin to write a new ending to your life story. He will fill you with a living hope, a lasting inheritance, a loving power.

Julia Johnson never spoke a word. Yet her life tells a story of God’s loving power and living hope. When she was born the doctor informed her parents Jim and Kathy that Julia had a rare genetic condition called trisomy 18. Unlike trisomy 21 or Down’s Syndrome, trisomy 18 children often do not leave the hospital. More than 90% of them never reach their first birthday. I was a young pastor when I first met Julia. She was 8 months old. Kathy, her mom, was a youth leader at the church. While we planned the fall youth group activities, Julia repeatedly stopped breathing. It was frightening to witness. Yet Kathy reached over, revived her and resumed our conversation. That was a small sample of the many life or death challenges Jim and Kathy faced every day and night.

Miraculously, Julia reached her first birthday and many more. In a short time we no longer saw her as a diagnosis or a special needs child. She became simply Julia – one of the many children in our growth group, our Sunday school, our church. Though she could not speak, Julia found many ways to express her love through her famous hugs, her infectious smile, her delightful music, her contagious laugh, her beautiful child-like faith.

In time Julia became our teacher. She taught doctors how to care for special needs children, she inspired young people to go into special education, and she taught all of us about faith. The Apostle Paul once said that God chooses the weak ones of this world to instruct the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27). It is only when we admit we are all weak, we are all disabled, we all have special needs can we be strong in Christ.

Kathy decorated Julia’s bedroom with butterflies. Sheets, curtains, bedding all bedecked with butterflies. Julia loved to lie on her bed and look up and see one of these beauties suspended over her. Kathy said, “I was not blind to my future. I knew what was ahead.” Why butterflies? Before they can soar, butterflies must wrestle and struggle to work their way out of the cocoon. That is why they are a powerful symbol of resurrection and hope. Life was a struggle for Julia, Kathy and Jim. Yet they celebrated every single day as a gift from Jesus. And the child who was not supposed to survive a day celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday last October.

But on December 16th Julia came home from the hospital one last time. I had the privilege to gather with Jim and Kathy and pray over her. The next day, we believe, a miracle unfolded. Like a butterfly breaking free and rising from its wrappings, Julia Elizabeth Johnson left behind her earthly body to receive, in the words of the Bible, an imperishable, immortal, resurrection body. She never spoke a word. But her life story told the Good News of God’s story better than any sermon ever could. She is well and

whole and healed in our Father's house. Today she knows the living hope, the lasting inheritance and the loving power of Jesus Christ.

The memorial service for Julia was filled with butterflies.

Don't let the spoils of this world rule your life.

Don't let the troubles of this world spoil your life.

If you want to receive the new birth Jesus won for Julia, me and you, if you want God to make your life a never-ending story, then join me in the traditional Easter greeting:

He is Risen!

He is Risen indeed!

1 Peter 1:3-9

3 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,

4 and into an inheritance

that can never perish, spoil or fade  
—kept in heaven for you,

5 who through faith

are shielded by God's power  
until the coming of the salvation

that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

6 In this you greatly rejoice,

though now for a little while

you may have had to suffer grief  
in all kinds of trials.

7 These have come

so that your faith

—of greater worth than gold,

which perishes even though refined by fire—  
may be proved genuine

and may result in praise, glory and honor  
when Jesus Christ is revealed.

8 Though you have not seen him,

you love him;

and even though you do not see him now,  
you believe in him

and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,

9 for you are receiving the goal of your faith,

the salvation of your souls.