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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
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Sermon on 1 Peter 1:3-9

Worship Theme:

HE LIVES—TO GIVE ME PROOF AND PEACE

Thomas had been taught and trained by Christ himself. He heard Jesus predict his death and resurrection. Yet, even after hearing the eyewitness testimony of friends, who all saw the resurrected Jesus, Thomas had reasonable doubts: "Rising from the dead. That can't be possible!" Today is a day of great comfort for any follower of Jesus who wrestles with doubt concerning Christ's promises or anything else in God's Word. Jesus does not come to rebuke Thomas' weak faith. Jesus comes to strengthen Thomas' faith, giving him proof of the mind-bending reality of the resurrection—to let him feel it, touch it, explore it. Jesus didn't reject Thomas. Jesus engaged Thomas and gave him peace. Still today, Jesus comes to his disciples in Word and sacrament. The living Lord speaks to us. He lets us partake of his true body and blood. When we show weakness of faith, he does not reject us. Just as he did with Thomas, Jesus engages us, giving us proof and peace.

Sermon Theme: "Too Good AND True!"

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

"If it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is." You've all heard that before, and maybe you yourself have even said it. The world today is full of scams and fake deals. They're very good at grabbing people's attention and offering them something interesting at an insane bargain. And if you've ever fallen for one of those scams, you know what happens. Your money is quickly gone, you receive a piece of junk or nothing at all, and you become more jaded and upset at the world. You trusted them, but you were wrong. It was too good to be true.

This has led many people to question nearly everything in their lives, including religion. So perhaps we also should consider this: is Christianity too good to be true? We regularly gather for worship and we read our Bibles at home and we know that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, but receiving every perfect blessing from God all for free and at someone else's expense sounds unreal. And if you've ever thought that, then you're in good company. I would challenge you to find a Christian who has never once doubted or wondered if everything about God and the Bible is just a little too good to be true, but I'll save you the time. You won't find one. It's a fact: Humanity struggles to believe the promises of God. Even the most faithful believers wrestle with the seeming disjunction between "the reality of right now" and "the hope of not yet." Because the reality right now is that life is painful and hard. And promises of a perfect future seem too good to be true. Experience makes that a bit hard to swallow, and we would like to see some proof!

We shouldn't be arrogant enough to say we never struggle with this. Unless we are better believers than all the prophets and apostles and everyone else in the

Bible, we will all struggle to believe God's incredible promises. In 1 Kings 19, the Prophet Elijah was fleeing for his life, convinced that he was the only believer left on earth. Elijah's experience made him so certain this was true that *he came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die*. Or Job, who after losing everything he had, despaired of his life, questioning God and his goodness – *Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil*. [Job 3] Even in the Gospel today from John 20, we see Jesus' disciples fearful and doubting. We often unfairly pick on Doubting Thomas, but remember that he wasn't even with the other 10 disciples this time as they were all hiding in a house *with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders*. This was the same day as the resurrection, and the disciples were already (or maybe still) full of doubt, certain that their lives were the next to be taken. The prophets and apostles spoke with God and some even saw God, yet as the experience of sin, pain, suffering, and loss continued to wear them down, they all wondered if the life God promised were too good to be true.

We often feel this too, especially when our expectations don't match what actually happens. Most people have positive expectations which logically should make sense: "If I work hard, I'll be rich. If I eat right, I'll be healthy. If I get what I want, I'll be happy." Then as Christians, we also often expect that "because I am a follower of God, he will make my life a good one (the way it should be!)." Some believers might protest and say, "I know better than that – this life will never be perfect because of sin." And that's certainly true.

But do you still find yourself asking God, "What did I do to deserve this?" Or maybe you have wonder, "How could God allow something like this to happen to someone like me?" Many people, both inside and outside the church, have said, "A loving God would never let THAT happen!" If we have ever said or thought any of those things, then we expect our life with God to always feel and look good.

But the Apostle Peter has something to say about that. Peter is a disciple we all know and love because, in many ways, we are all a bit like Peter. One moment Peter loudly proclaims he will never fall away from Jesus and the next he denies he ever met the man. One moment Peter is ready to do whatever Jesus tells him and the next he is nowhere to be seen. One moment Peter is walking on water with eyes fixed on Jesus and the next he is sinking in the waves because he was overcome by fear. One moment Peter has a crystal clear understanding of God's beautiful promises and the next he doesn't understand the simplest thing God has said.

So when Peter speaks, we tend to pay attention because we can relate to him. And this is what Peter says: *Now for a little while, you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials*. People hear that and say, "See?! Christianity doesn't take care of anything. Following God just makes life harder and less fun. Why would I want that?! I want a good life, not a miserable one. God's promises clearly don't work – just look at the hard lives so many Christians have: financial struggles, incurable diseases, lost jobs, crippling pains, worry about an unknown future, unexpected deaths... No thank you! I'll keep my life the way it is instead of trying something that is obviously too good to be true."

And yes, sometimes those things do happen to Christians. In fact, all the things I listed are experiences we have even just here in our congregation. But we can't miss the rest of the story. Peter said we will suffer griefs in all kinds of trials. Jesus himself warned, "*In this world you will have trouble.*" [John 16] It's the reason Elijah and Job wanted to die, the reason all eleven disciples doubted the resurrection, and the reason we wonder if God's promises and the Christian faith actually are too good to be true.

So here's the simple, powerful, perfect answer God gives for every one of these struggle and doubts and fears: JESUS LIVES. If we're looking for proof that everything God says and promises in his Word is true, there is only one place we will find it. It won't be within ourselves, and it won't be by comparing our lives with our expectations. The only reliable place to find the proof that leads to perfect peace is in God himself and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

How do we know God is reliable? His Word shows us. God is the only one who is able to take everything that happens in this world and make it work for our eternal good. He has been doing this for the entire history of the world! When Elijah was ready to give up and die, God provided Elijah with food, rest, strength, and encouragement to keep going because there were still 7,000 other believers just in Israel alone. When Job literally sat in dust and ashes with not a thing to his name anymore, not even his health, the comfort he received was finding that even in his worst and darkest moments of life, the God of all creation was still there. He lost everything else, but God had not left him. The presence of the Almighty God was enough. Even to a group of eleven doubting and fearful men who should have known better, God came to them, not with anger or rebuke, but with compassion as the crucified and risen Christ stood among them and proclaimed words of peace.

No matter what experiences we have and whether they line up with our expectations or not, we take great comfort in this undeniable truth: God does not change. And if God does not change, then his promises do not change. And if God's promises do not change, then they are completely reliable. And if God and his promises are completely reliable, then they all must be true and they all must be ours exactly as he says they are. By faith in Christ, everything God promised and accomplished is given to us. That's why Peter says our *faith is of greater worth than gold* – it brings every true and reliable promise of God into our lives and holds on to them with certain confidence!

The challenge of the Christian life is still the difference between the "right now" and the "not yet." Right now we may have troubles, and in fact probably do, because Jesus told us we will. But our troubles right now do not take away from the glory of not yet – the undying, unending glory and perfection of the heaven that is ours freely in Jesus.

Peter was one of the disciples cowering in the locked room – he was there, and he knew exactly what all their experiences had been like and felt like. But when Jesus proclaimed peace to them as their risen and victorious Savior, he gave Peter a peace to remember for himself and to pass along to others. In the opening words of Peter's first letter, the Holy Spirit definitely used Peter to accomplish

exactly that. Listen carefully to these words again, and know that in Christ, every single one is true and every single one is for you! *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. This inheritance is 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 all 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 the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—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 end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

A living hope. A Savior risen from the dead. A perfect eternal inheritance waiting for us in heaven. God's presence guarding us and guiding us through life. The ability to rejoice even when life is full of hardships. Priceless faith connecting us to Christ. Joy that defies words. Eternal salvation for our souls. Not one of those promises is a scam or a fake deal. For every moment of doubt, Jesus gives us confidence. For every moment of fear, Jesus gives us peace. For every moment of pain, Jesus gives us healing. For every moment of sin, Jesus gives us forgiveness. We won't experience the complete fullness of these things until heaven, but they are all absolutely worth waiting for!

Because Jesus paid for all sins on the cross, conquered death forever, and rose again in victory, we know with 100% certainty that he is our Savior from every evil and our Provider of every good. It's not too good to be true. God promised it. Jesus lives to prove it. He freely and lovingly gives us immeasurably greater good than we could ever ask for or deserve, which means these eternal blessings from him are **too good... AND they are completely true!** Thank you, Lord, for the proof and peace we have and rejoice in because of this unchanging truth: Alleluia, Christ is risen – he is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.