

# **Year A**

## **1 Peter 1:3-9**

By the time she was 21, Gerda Weissman Klein had spent six years living under Nazi rule — three of them in concentration camps. Her parents and brother had been taken away. Her best friend had died in her arms during a 350-mile death march. And she weighed only 68 pounds when she was found by American forces in an abandoned bicycle factory. But Gerda survived. She married the soldier who rescued her. And ever since — as an author, a historian and a

crusader for tolerance — she has taught the world that it is often in our most hopeless moments that we discover the extent of our strength and the depth of our love. At the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston there is a small quotation from Gerda Weissmann Klein inscribed on a wall. It refers to that best friend of hers who did not survive. It reads; “Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the concentration camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire

possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend.”

What an inheritance that is: to receive something so simple, yet so precious and significant. Yet, where is that raspberry today? It is long gone in the dust and the dirt of a horrible place that also is no more. Only words of testimony remain to describe that raspberry and its enormous significance to two deeply traumatised children. At the beginning of 1 Peter we are told that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead has given us an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading. This

inheritance is the sum of all the good and all the love that this world could muster and so much more. It is the gift of God's Son and the price was his life.

This Sunday is known as Low Sunday because it is the final day in the series of eight days that follows Easter Sunday inclusive. It is the low end of the sequence if you like. But this Sunday also has a certain heaviness about it. Easter day is past with all of the tension and busyness leading up to it and now it is over and we may feel a bit deflated. Only about five hundred or so people ever saw the risen Christ according to

the apostle Paul.<sup>1</sup> That's not a lot of people. You could almost fit them all into this church! Our faith depends on the witness of these people. On the surface that appears to be tenuous. We would want an awful lot more people to have seen him; the more the better, but the right number did see him and through their lives of joyful service and suffering their faith was proved. Do you have Low Sunday blues this morning? Well, if you do, take comfort from the witness of those who saw him. And take comfort from the description of the life of faith that we find

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:5-8

here. Joy and suffering come together to form a genuine faith. We might warm to the joy bit, but might not be too keen on seeing the suffering bit there too, for none of us take well to suffering. I was intrigued by a quotation from Malcolm Muggeridge that I read recently. He wrote; "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and

enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness.”<sup>2</sup> That’s quite a remarkable assertion, isn’t it? Of course, we don’t see any of that at the time. We’re struggling just to get through from one day to the next and there is no good in our suffering.

Somerset Maugham, the English writer, once wrote a story about a janitor at St Peter's Church in London. One day a young vicar discovered that the janitor was illiterate and fired him. Jobless, the man invested his meagre savings in a tiny tobacco shop, where

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<sup>2</sup> Muggeridge, *Homemade* July 1990

he prospered, bought another, expanded, and ended up with a chain of tobacco shops worth several hundred thousand pounds. One day the man's banker said, "You've done well for an illiterate, but just think where you'd be if you could read and write?" "Well," replied the man, "I'd be janitor of St. Peter's Church in Neville Square."<sup>3</sup>

Joy is sown in tears. That's the Easter model. That's what the Easter story brings to us. There would be no resurrection without death. There would have been no death without the tears of the one who knew

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<sup>3</sup> *Bits and Pieces*, June 24, 1993, p. 23.

he had to go to the darkest place to save. But what joy there is for him now! It is difficult for us to learn to understand that suffering is not a symptom of a life gone wrong. Instead it is a profound mystery that remains at the heart of God's immense love for his creation. Last week I reminded you that it is impossible to prise apart the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and expect them to make sense in their own right. It is only when taken together that the way of Christ can influence our own way in life.

When Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl was arrested by the Nazis in World War II, he was stripped of everything--property, family, possessions. He had spent years researching and writing a book on the importance of finding meaning in life--concepts that later would be known as logotherapy. When he arrived in Auschwitz, the infamous death camp, even his manuscript, which he had hidden in the lining of his coat, was taken away.

"I had to undergo and overcome the loss of my spiritual child, " Frankl wrote. "Now it seemed as if nothing and no one would

survive me; neither a physical nor a spiritual child of my own! I found myself confronted with the question of whether under such circumstances my life was ultimately void of any meaning."

He was still wrestling with that question a few days later when the Nazis forced the prisoners to give up their clothes.

"I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber," said Frankl. "Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in the pocket of the newly acquired coat a single page torn out of

a Hebrew prayer book, which contained the main Jewish prayer, Shema Yisrael (Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.)

"How should I have interpreted such a 'coincidence' other than as a challenge to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?"

Later, as Frankl reflected on his ordeal, he wrote in his book *Man's search for Meaning*, "There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst

conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life . . . 'He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how.'"

Our quest for meaning this morning, on this the Low Sunday of the Easter season brings our experiences of suffering and joy before the glorious inheritance that is before us and instead of holding these as contradictions we are led to receive them as the way of Christ: the best way for us all. Amen.