As we explore the resurrection for our lives, we have seen Jesus walk through walls and a vision of life brought to a pile of bones to let us know He is active and gracious. I know many of you have countless instances by which God’s power, grace, and mercy have been proven time and again.

This week, Job’s affirmation, “I know that my redeemer lives” has led me to consider the ways in which we come to know Jesus is indeed alive. Think of all the things in your life that has brought you to belief at this point. I can point to three ways I can affirm His existence.

First through my mind. It convinces me that without a Creator there would be no universe. Some being must have caused it to come into being. Because it is vast beyond imagining, this God must indeed be powerful.

Second through my heart. I trust my parents. They have loved me and taught me of God’s grace and love in Jesus Christ. The gift of my lovely wife Wendy, and two precious children, Liz and Matt, and the love we share instills a deep sense this God loves me and this world.

Third through my soul. As I look upon this world I not only see something that exists but I see something beautiful, mysterious, and wonderful beyond imagining. I know that if I lived a thousand life times I would not begin to experience all its wonders. God uses this world and the people in it to touch the depth of my being. For example, the gift of music for me is like God speaking directly to my soul. Certain music lights it up like fireworks that opens me up to praise our wonderful God.

These are all wonderful ways we come to know and believe in God. Some weeks ago I shared my incident with the money-producing dryer in which the providence of God was displayed in a delightful way. These are the easy times to see and believe in God. But what about those difficult times in life?

Job experiences great tragedy in loss of fortunes, friends, and family but somehow he still affirms God’s sovereignty and goodness saying, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Satan believes Job’s faith is rooted in God’s blessings and then, when everything good in this life is taken away, his faith in God will fail, but Job seems to find God in a different place than success, pleasure, or happiness.

Whether or not we experience such suffering, we are all challenged to go deeper in faith. There are times in life in which God won’t appear in a dryer and you will fail to get the promotion you wanted and things are going poorly in your family life. Job shows us a way to have faith, even when God is not pouring forth blessings. This makes our faith recession proof, so to speak.

Graduates, there will be hard, challenging times in your life, but if you can make your faith strong enough to withstand those times each challenge will make you stronger, more focused and thankful to God.

St. John of the Cross described the times we have difficulty connecting to God as the dark night of the soul. We can enter the dark night without even an external tragedy. It is when your beloved hymns or reciting prayers no longer give you any sense of the presence of God. It’s something like being overexposed to a piece of music. I remember one December I had heard the Halleluiah Chorus so many times that by the time I heard it in worship, I felt nothing. I felt cheated.
And it is precisely at that point that God teaches us about the depth of our faith.

Even the blessings of worship that feeds us can be a substitute for pure love of God. St. John of the Cross wrote, “You should strive in your prayer for a pure conscience, a will that is wholly with God, and a mind truly set upon Him.”

So when we find the blessings of God drying up, when things are not going our way, seek to focus directly on God. Let your prayer be a desire of your heart and soul to know God intimately, directly from the depth of your being. Pray not for relief, or success, or the pleasure of praise but for God’s very being to become one with yours. Though we can find this apart from suffering, God uses it as a tool.

Christian author CS Lewis moved through a Job-like experience through the death of his wife Joy from cancer after three years of marriage. A confirmed bachelor, no one was more surprised that he fell in love than Lewis and when he fell he fell hard and so, when she was lost, he nearly lost his mind. He described his agony in the book a Grief Observed.

Isn’t God supposed to be good? Isn’t God supposed to love us? And does God want us to suffer? What if the answer to that question is yes? ‘Cause I’m not sure that God particularly wants us to be happy. I think he wants us to be able to love and be loved. He wants us to grow up. I suggest to you that it is because God loves us that he makes us the gift of suffering.

—C.S. Lewis

This is very hard to believe, especially when we see the innocent suffer. But in James’ epistle we find this exact notion, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

I think Job came to know of God in a negative sense, something like a fish comes to know water only after spending a few terrifying moments on dry land. A few seconds of flopping, I’m sure, creates a profound appreciation and love for the water it always swims in.

That is the dark night of the soul. When the world in which you live and breathe is suddenly snatched away. However, while being a fish out of water is painful, it is precisely the pain that makes you aware of another reality. As Rev. Dr. Steve Hayner discovered.

Steve preached here at First Presbyterian a little over a year ago. He was president of Columbia Seminary in Atlanta and of Intervarsity before that. His love and compassion reached across a very wide section of the PCUSA and, indeed, the whole country. His friendship was not limited by political or theological stripes. He was an enthusiastic Christian, in love with God, the church, and the world. A year ago last Easter he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His suffering at times was deep and painful. Though Steve’s faith always had a deep foundation, I think he discovered a more direct, more pure experience of God through his suffering. Suffering can give one eyes to see God in the most profound and simplest of places. His hospice Chaplain Tom Livengood spent time with Steve reflecting on this truth.

While we walked, Steve asked, “So, when will I know it’s time to start hospice?” It’s an important question. When does quality of life become more important than preservation of life? When do you accept that nothing more can be done, stop chemotherapy, and prepare to die? As we pondered these hard questions, we stumbled upon a group of schoolchildren dancing in a circle. Steve didn’t see them at first, so I stopped and said, “Look, Steve!” pointing to the unabashedly frolicking folly of the kids. And what did Jesus say the kingdom of God looks like? It looks like this. We didn’t say a word. We simply watched in silent gratitude.

Steve loved Christmas, but, like many who are dying, he was unable to attend a worship service. So, when his church surprised him and began to sing Christmas carols, he was overwhelmed by grace. Grace is about those unexpected moments when God gives you something extraordinary. For Steve, this was one of those. He said it was
like a foretaste of heaven, especially seeing all
the children that flooded his front porch. Sort of
like the schoolchildren we saw dancing. Sort of
like the kingdom of God.

Excerpt from “Joyfully, Steve” by Tom Livengood,
*Presbyterians Today, May 2015*

A few months ago, Steve left this mortal life. Stripped bare of all hope in this life, he began to see God’s kingdom in the simplest of things. Job did not even have these moments. He only had the scorn of his friends. But as a fish out of water, I believe he began to breathe in God’s presence directly. His life had become pure prayer and unfiltered experience of God’s power.

It is in the moment of suffering that Job boldly declares to the void, “I know my redeemer lives...and that I shall him face to face!”

More than anything, God wants us to know and love our Lord. Not the blessings. Not His gifts. And because God loves us so much, God will do anything to get us there. Even die and rise again on a cross! Amen.