

**SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S  
"A COMMUNITY OF HOPE"**

# **Themes of Easter**

**Second Sunday of Easter**

**April 19, 2009**

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**1 John 1:1-2:2**

**T**hat which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. **2** The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. **3** We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. **4** We write this to make our joy complete. **5** This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. **6** If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. **8** If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

**1 John 2 (NIV)** My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. **2** He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Today's the second Sunday of Easter, and at last the weather really feels like it, doesn't it? All the themes of spring are in evidence: flowers are

blooming, the grass is green, the days are getting longer, and the weather's getting warm. In our church calendar, Easter is 50 days long—it goes from Easter Sunday until Pentecost, which is May 31 this year. Forty days after Easter is Ascension Day, when Jesus bodily ascended into heaven from where he poured out the Holy Spirit on the waiting disciples ten days later on Pentecost.

In our lectionary, the gospel reading for today always presents us with Thomas and his skepticism about Jesus rising from the dead. For Thomas, the idea was just unbelievable: **“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it”**. Now we don't know why Thomas was so skeptical. At the very least, we know he had seen Jesus die a gruesome death. After having seen that, any reasonable person would have been skeptical that Jesus could still be alive. But of course, we see life coming out of death all around us these days in this glorious spring. But if we're not careful, we'll mistake the themes of spring for the themes of Easter, and there's a big difference. During these next six weeks, our New Testament readings will be from the First Letter of John. Chuck and I will be preaching from this short letter for six weeks, so I encourage you spend some time reading and re-reading it over the next six weeks. It's short—you can probably read the whole thing in about a half an hour.

The themes of Easter are very much evident in 1 John. I don't mean blooming flowers, or green grass, or longer days. I mean Jesus, us, God's love for us, light and darkness, our love for one another, and eternal life. I think we all automatically think of Easter in pastel colors, or white dresses, and flowers and the trappings of spring. That's natural for us because we live in the Northern Hemisphere. But in Argentina, where my father's family's from, March April, and May are autumn months, and by July and August it's the cold of winter. I say this to remind myself and all of us that Easter is not just about new life and new possibilities, it's about a different kind of life—eternal life. In fact, the words “new life” appear only twice in the New Testament. “Eternal life” occurs 42 times.

We can begin looking at the themes of Easter in 1 John at the beginning of chapter 2, where John gives us his reason for writing. **“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.”** Wait a minute! Lent's over with! Isn't that when we focus on sin? No. Lent's when we focus on our need for a savior *from* sin. It seems the people to whom John was writing this letter had been influenced by a group of teachers or leaders who had somehow managed to disconnect Easter Sunday from Good Friday. They had disconnected Jesus' resurrection from the dead in a blaze of glorious new life in the power of the Holy Spirit from the shameful, painful, ghastly, dark death he died.

If you think for a minute, you'll realize how easy it is to do that. Who wouldn't rather think of Easter eggs and bonnets with bright ribbons instead of a corpse on a cross? It's no surprise at all that almost eight times as many people attended our Easter services as attended our two services on Good Friday. But that only shows how desperate we are to get away from another theme of Easter that Jesus presents us with through this letter from John: chapter 1, verse 5: **"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."**

Sunlight is becoming more and more plentiful in spring, isn't it? It's one of the themes of spring. But even inside the Arctic Circle, where the sun shines 24 hours a day in the summer, there's still darkness because there are shadows. Easter's not about the light of spring, it's about the light of Christ, **"in whom there is no darkness at all."** Jesus and his relationship to us is one of the themes of Easter. How many of us can say there is no darkness in us at all? Most of you have never heard me utter an angry or impatient word. But I invite you to interview members of my family and see if they've had the same experience. Or my dog.

John is making the same kind of invitation to his readers in his opening sentence, but in a little different way, and with a much different result. In as sense, his readers have already interviewed him—about Jesus. He's reminding them what he and his fellow apostles experienced in Jesus: **"that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."** The word translated "concerning" literally means "about" or "around". What he's getting at is that Jesus' human being, the person they had heard and had seen with their own eyes and whom they had touched with their own hands, was "around" **"that which was from the beginning"—"the Word of life"**.

In other words, the human being Jesus is and always has been the eternal Word of God. He is completely divine and completely human. Because he is completely human, Jesus was able to die on the cross as **"the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world."** Because he is completely God, the "God incarnate, man divine" rose from the dead full of eternal life, life that he makes freely available to us, now, in this life.

The teachers that had influenced John's readers had disconnected Jesus' death from his glorious resurrection. They wanted to focus on the themes of Easter that we all find attractive: new life, joy, power and love in the Holy Spirit. They forgot that you can't have a resurrection until you have a death. Even

Thomas found out that you can't experience the explosion of God's future kingdom in Jesus appearing in the upper room without the dreary and all-too-familiar Jesus cold and dead in the tomb.

But it's that dreary, all-too-familiar experience of life and death in this world that Jesus came to take in for himself. God the Father, in his mercy, sent Jesus Christ "to share our human nature, live and die as one of us." In many ways, Jesus' life in this world was just like ours. He felt the pressure of not enough time to get everything done. He got tired. He got hungry. He got cold and he got uncomfortably hot. He felt frustrated with other people. He felt misunderstood and alone sometimes. He pleaded for his life to his Father. He also saw the beauty of spring in Palestine. He enjoyed good times with his family and friends and neighbors, the joy of childhood and of satisfying spiritual communion with God his Father.

And as we say to God the Father in our eucharistic prayer, he died "as one of us, to reconcile us you, the God and Father of all." When I shy away from Jesus' death on the cross in favor of the glories of his resurrection, part of me is saying, "I'm glad I don't need to think about that any more." Part of me is saying, "I'm so glad I've got the Bible and I know the truth—and I'm right!" Not right with God, or right with my fellow human beings, but just right.

But it's just that that I do need to think about my need for a savior. I need God's forgiveness every day, several times a day. **"If we claim to be without sin,"** says John, **"we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."** This is another great theme of Easter—God's love for us in cleansing and purifying us completely through Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus' death is available to us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to cleanse us from our sins and give us a clear conscience. Do you realize how precious and rare a clear conscience is in today's world? By his continual and constant forgiveness, Jesus brings his perfect light into our lives and fills them with his light and grace.

Jesus is here, today, with us right now. He's here in his word, in his Spirit, in his sacrament. He's here to cleanse us and fill us. He's here to manifest his eternal life in us by transforming us in the midst of our struggles, our uncertainties, and our successes. He's here to show himself to the world through us as he transforms us more and more into the Community of Hope he has called us to be.

Let us pray.