



# “The Easter People: 1. Walking the Walk”

Text: 1 John 1-2:2

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We continue to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord on this Second Sunday of Easter. We must remember that Easter is not only a day in the church year, but a season. Easter is 50 days in length, taking us from the morning of the resurrection to Pentecost Sunday in May. It's still Easter, even though the jelly beans may be gone and you're getting tired of egg salad.

In this Easter season, we're going to spend some time with the First Letter of John. These are the epistle lessons for the season from the Revised Common Lectionary. We'll examine the lessons under the banner of “The Easter People.” That's who we are: people of the resurrection. But, what does that mean in practical terms?

We have very limited information about the Letters of John. We don't know who wrote them. It was certainly not the Apostle John as tradition often tells us. They seem to come after the Gospel of John, perhaps as much as ten years, putting them at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second. The Letters of John are not like the letters of Paul. They are not addressed to specific congregations in specific places. That has earned the Letters of John the name “catholic,” meaning “universal.” These letters are for all churches, in that all churches – even to this day – hold many challenges in common.

In general, we don't know why these letters were written, though we can uncover a few hints. In the second chapter of the first letter, we read that a schism – a division – has occurred in the community of believers and is based on a denial that Jesus is the Christ. So, in the First Letter of John, the author is attempting to set the theological record straight and prevent the community from any further divisions.

What the community is told is as important now as it was then. We need to be reminded of how we are to live together as “The Easter People,” and especially so when issues and schisms are not present. What the early Christians received is a gift we can receive as well.

The opening lesson of the First Letter of John is found in the second full paragraph. There we read:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

In this early community, there were evidently some who either had not professed their faith in Jesus Christ, or they had professed their faith, they lived as though they had never heard of him. The charge of hypocrisy is as old as the church. There are always those who say one thing and do another. There are always those who claim to believe and live as though they never heard of God’s love in Jesus Christ. There’s nothing new in the charge being leveled against some in the early church.

But, if the old maxim is true, that “actions speak louder than words,” then the recipients of the First Letter of John were in a bit of trouble. They claimed the Light of Christ, while continuing to stumble around in the dark. They said they believed one thing and lived another.

In a perfectly true, but pastorally dangerous charge, the author of the letter says that the people who live in such a way are living a lie. “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true.” Those are the kind of words that can get you in serious trouble as a preacher. There’s no equivocation in the words. If you say you believe and live as though you don’t, you are a liar. That may reflect a lack of tact, or discretion, but the point is made: if you say you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, then your life should bear the evidence of that confession.

When you stop and think about it for a moment, you’ll discover that one of the things that makes a community a community is shared beliefs and shared actions. When groups of people – large and small – are united in purpose and plan, it can be an unstoppable force. Look over the flow of history and you’ll find people from diverse backgrounds, coming together for a common good.

When people faced a common threat, history tells us that they banded together to protect each other and stand against the threat. When people had a common challenge, they joined forces to meet the challenge. When people were uncertain, they gathered together and discerned the situation and acted accordingly.

This is part of what makes a community a community – whether it is a city, a town, a club, a fraternity or sorority, a school, or a church. Community is formed on the basis of shared values and shared behaviors.

So, when part of the community fails to live according to the shared values and behaviors, the community is placed under stress and can fracture into contentious groups. That’s what apparently happened in this part of the early church. People began abandoning long-held understandings and started living as though the message of Jesus had never been received. For a community of faith, that is a disaster in the making.

We are all too familiar with the news stories that come out from time to time of Christian leaders with net worth in the tens of millions, air-conditioned dog houses, private jets, multi-million dollar mansions, opulent lifestyles, fancy clothes, and financial empires. The stories hit and the world around us cries out, “hypocrites” and “impostors” and “frauds.” The community of believers is divided and the world turns a deaf ear on the message we have received. They see people saying they believe in the light, but living in darkness.

The First Letter of John reminds us that we shared a common ground. We read:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

When I was growing up, in a nearby country church, there was a minister I got to know well later in life. Once we were talking about the church and Ken said to me, “You know a good definition of the church?” “No,” I said, knowing he was about to give me one. “The church,” he said, “is just a pack of sinners relying on grace.”

And that’s just about as good as it gets. I’ve been hanging around here for 21 years, and I love you all more than my television, but in my 21 years, I haven’t met a perfect person – yet. You all are good people, don’t misunderstand. But perfect? Sinless? It’s hard to imagine such a thing and even more terrifying to think of living with such a person. Ask my wife.

We are just a bunch of sinners who have received God’s grace. That grace is the great equalizer. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven for all that missteps and mistakes that we’ve made along the way. In Jesus Christ, our past is locked away in God’s secret heart and we are pardoned from all that we have done that is not within God’s will and way for us. No one is better than another. No one is worse than another.

And because we are forgiven and freed, we have died to the old life we lived and we have been raised with Christ to the new life of “The Easter People.” That means we can live the new life, harmonizing what we say with how we live. There does not need to be a contradiction any more. We do not need to live hypocritical lives, saying one thing and doing another. As “The Easter People” we can talk the talk and walk the walk.

There is an old tradition of the Risus Paschalis – “the Easter laugh.” In the earlier days of the church, during the Easter sermon, the preacher would insert a little joke to bring forth laughter on Easter morning. We had a few chuckles last week. The idea was that God laughed in the face of those who sought to silence God and raised Jesus from the dead. Gotcha!

So, I thought I’d tell you my favorite funny story. I’ve told it before, but don’t stop me if you’ve heard this before. It’s a story by the late comedian, Flip Wilson. Wilson had a character he called Reverend Leroy, and one day Reverend Leroy was preaching to the congregation. The time came for the offering. The plates shot around the room and returned empty.

“Brothers and sisters,” Reverend Leroy said, “this won’t do. In order for this church to progress, first this church has got to crawl, this church has got to crawl!”

And the members cried out, “Make it crawl, Rev. Make it crawl!”

“And after this church has crawled, this church has got to stand up and walk! This church has got to walk!”

And the members yelled, “Make it walk, Rev! Make it walk!”

“And after this church has walked, this church has got to run! This church has got to run!”

And the members yelled, “Let it run, Rev! Let it run!”

“And in order for this church to run, it’s gonna take money! It’s gonna take money!”

And the members yelled, “Let it crawl, Rev. Let it crawl!”

There are those times when what we believe asks more from us than we think we can give. There are those times when our beliefs are hard to live in a world that is often dismissive of our faith. There are times when we wish we could just “let it crawl.”

But being “The Easter People” means “walking the walk.” It means living as Christ modeled life for us. It means putting aside the old way of life and living the resurrected life of God’s people. And because none of us is perfect, and because the past has been forgiven by the grace of God, we can begin again and live the life of “The Easter People.”

For now and evermore. Amen.