

April 8, 2018

TEXT: I John 1:1–7

TITLE: Walking in the Light

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

It is finally Easter season! After 40 days of Lent and one Holy Week focusing on the last days of Jesus and his death on the cross, we can re-tell the stories about how the risen Christ appeared to his disciples. These stories are almost 2000 years old, but they have a vibrancy and immediacy to them that speaks through the ages. Two of the stories were read for us earlier in worship. There's the great story of Mary Magdalene weeping outside the tomb, who sees someone she thinks is the gardener but instead is the risen Christ. Jesus tells her, "Do not hang onto me but go and tell the other disciples," which she does.

Next is a story from Easter evening, in which the disciples are gathered behind locked doors—still afraid that they too might be arrested as followers of Jesus—when the risen Christ appears to them. They rejoiced and Jesus said something like this, "Don't hide in here. As God has sent me, so I send you. Go as the Spirit leads you. Be my witnesses, forgiving sins and healing the world." In both cases the focus is not on the "how" of resurrection: How is Jesus alive again? How is he able to walk around and appear and interact with his followers? Rather the focus is on the "now what" of resurrection: If Christ is alive and we accept that good news, and that good news dramatically changes our perspective on life, now what should we do? To be honest, our brains prefer to focus on the "how" questions. We want to understand resurrection. But Christ re-directed the first disciples from the "how" to the "now what" questions; and he has been doing that for 2000 years, even today with each one of us.

As proof of this, consider the second scripture reading we heard today—the passage from I John. It begins "*We declare to you what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life.*" The "word of life" is both Jesus Christ and the gospel story about Jesus Christ. Easter is the precise point where these two perspectives come together: Jesus is alive—and telling about the living Jesus makes us alive. This Word of Life isn't interested in the "how" of resurrection, only the "now what" of resurrection. So what exactly is this "now what" for us? The same as it was for the first disciples: the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene—Go and tell the others. The risen Christ to the disciples in the upper room—As God has sent me, so I send you. The Word of Life speaking through the author of I John—May you have fellowship with one another and walk in the light as Christ is the Light. *Go and tell. Go as I've sent you. Go have fellowship and walk in the light of the Lord.*

To help us hear that good news today, I have for you a slogan, a story, and a symbol. First, the slogan. In one of Thomas Friedman's books I came across this comment: "In the history of the world, no one has ever washed a rental car."¹ Have you ever washed a rental car? Sure, we take care of it and return it with a full tank of gas, but washing someone else's car? Never.

Why is that? Simple—the car doesn't belong to you. You are not personally invested in taking care of this car, so why bother washing it. Now, ask yourself this question: Is the gospel of Jesus Christ something I own or just rent? Is faith something I rent on Sundays, something I use in times of need, but otherwise I return it to the lot and let someone else worry about it? Do you ever tell yourself, I used to drive around in a small country church, but now I've upgraded to a big Presbyterian SUV with stained glass windows? It's a funny yet troubling thought. Do you own the Christian faith or just rent it? Because no one ever washes rental cars. But if you own it—you care for it. You value it and depend on it to get you through life, so you don't take it for granted. The good news of Easter, the word of life, is not something to rent but something to embrace and own.

Second, a story—from the same book by Thomas Friedman, a book called *Thank You for Being Late*. Friedman wrote about how lots of people are worrying about the loss of good-paying jobs in America. Some politicize this issue and blame it on immigration or blame it on Democrats, Republicans or Congress in general. But much of the loss of employment is simply a result of technological advances that have occurred in the last 15 years. Factories today are different from what they were a generation ago. Automation increases efficiency but decreases the number of workers needed. Friedman told this brief story. He said that the future factory will have only two employees—a man and a dog. The man will be there to feed the dog. The dog will be there to keep the man from touching the machines.²

America still has a lot of manufacturing jobs—over 12 million in recent years. But 50 years ago, 1 in 4 Americans worked in a manufacturing job; now it is less than 1 in 10. There simply are fewer jobs that pay a healthy wage with benefits anymore. Years ago people shifted from the farm fields to the factories. Now people are shifting from the factories to service counters and health care centers. The fastest growing American jobs are in the health care industry (nurses, personal aides) or in restaurants and retail stores—places that serve others but offer only minimum or low wages.

What does that have to do with Easter faith? Think again about the message we heard in I John. The author is writing to a church community, one just like ours, and saying this: *We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us—and our fellowship is with God and God's Son Jesus Christ.* The Greek word for fellowship is “koinonia.” It means coming together—it means connecting, sharing, communing—it means being a church, being a family, being a caring body guided by Christ. This “koinonia” isn't limited to Sunday morning. It's not something we rent; it's something we own. And it's not restricted to inside these walls but it is with us wherever we go and (going back to Friedman's story) wherever we work.

Caring for one another is not just a matter of medical care or social welfare. It is how we treat one another, who we hire and what we pay and whether we give pensions to one another. When companies care for their employees, we should celebrate that fact. When businesses treat people poorly, underpay them, “rent” them and then dispose of them, we should challenge that as people of faith. Christian faith is not about individuals

but about communities. Notice that the entire passage we read from I John was written in the first person plural—We declare to you; we testify to this that you may have fellowship with us. The risen Christ sent Mary to the others, to the group of disciples—and the goal of Easter faith is “koinonia”, fellowship, communion. That involves us being faithful together literally where we live and work.

Lastly, a symbol—an image that seems especially relevant today. The Easter message in I John says we are to walk in the light, not walk in the darkness. The key symbol of Easter is light: the sunrise over the cemetery that allowed the women to see the empty tomb; the light of that good news that chases away all darkness and fear and despair. There’s a lot I can say about walking in the light, but it feels too abstract. I could say “Don’t sin. Be kind, patient, generous. Walk in the light” and no one would disagree with me. But what does that look like literally? So here’s a symbol, an image from the recent news.

In eastern San Diego is the Otay Mesa border area between the U.S. and Mexico. It’s the place where eight enormous prototypes for the proposed border wall have been erected. On the American side of this border, there isn’t much to see: narrow roads, sunburned highways, industrial buildings, maybe a small ranch with a cow chewing on melons. On the Tijuana side of that same border, the city crashes into it like a flood hitting a shoreline: there are houses, apartments, families, kids playing ball, people living and working together.

Now: remember the Berlin Wall. The clean side was on the East—guarded by trucks, cameras, attack dogs and countless soldiers. The West Berlin side had the murals, the color, the celebration of life. And today? The Mexican side of the border wall is ablaze with color—an open-air art gallery, a place of murals, taco stands, strolling musicians and ice cream vendors. The American side is sterile, empty, guarded. Who is free and who is the prisoner?³

Walls are antithetical to walking. Yet Christ calls us to walk in the light, not in the darkness. To walk by faith, not in fear. To walk together, not in isolation. The verses in I John are quite clear: *God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Christ while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as Christ himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.*

The “how” of Easter always gives way to the “now what” of Easter. We are sent into the world to own the faith, tell the faith, and live the faith. In this “koinonia” fellowship, the risen Christ makes us new and our joy becomes complete. That’s the Easter good news. Thanks be to God!

¹ Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late*, p. 323.

² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³ Cf. Opinion essay by Luis Alberto Urea, “Looking at Trump’s ‘Beautiful Wall,’” *New York Times*, March 3, 2018.