

Second Sunday of Easter; April 7, 2024

1 John 1:1-4

Fellowship in Jesus is Complete Joy

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have observed and our hands have touched regarding the Word of Life – the life appeared, and we have seen it. We testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We are proclaiming what we have seen and heard also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us. We write these things to you so that our joy may be complete.

When Jesus called St. John to be a disciple, John was mending his nets. John is a mender. His written ministry comes in after the church has been in existence for several decades, and at a time when much false teaching had begun to creep in. There is a need for a voice to call people back to the original foundations of Christ, and that is the ministry of the Apostle John. He calls people back to truth. When we begin to drift, when some false concept creeps into our thinking or into our actions, the Spirit still uses the words of St. John to call us back, to mend the nets and to set things straight.

We find that purpose especially in John's three letters. We heard the first four verses of his first letter, which introduce and summarize his main message.

Three things are highlighted for us in this introduction: A relationship, a fellowship, and a joy that follows. But it must all begin with this matter of relationship, for John is concerned first about the family of God. It is into the intimacy of God's family circle that the Apostle John takes us.

The Bible opens with the phrases, "In the beginning." That is the beginning of the material creation, of matter. In the Gospel of John there is another "beginning." That Gospel begins with these words: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.** That beginning goes back before creation, and teaches us that Jesus is eternal. That is the unbeginning beginning, the beginning that is eternal

But now, in this letter, there is still a third beginning: **that which was from the beginning.** It is hard to explain what this "beginning" is exactly. John could again be teaching Jesus' eternal nature, but the flow of the message following is relational. So John is likely referring to the continuous experience of the Christian life, which is contemporary all the time, new and fresh and vital, a continuous renewal and fresh start.

And John warns all through this letter that we must cling only to that which is **from the beginning**. If someone comes to you with a new and improved Jesus, don't believe it. It must be from the beginning. The cults in John's day and today say, "Look, we have something different, additional, something that has come along much later in history than the Bible; we have an additional revelation to give you." Say to them, "Keep it. I want that which is from the beginning." John reminds us frequently, go back to that which is from the beginning.

Now he says this One from the beginning is a person, and he has been seen and heard and handled. In other words, Christian faith rests upon great facts, the acts of a human being in history. Our Christian faith does not rest simply on concepts, or doctrinal statements, but concepts and doctrines seen in time. Being a Christian is being connected, related to Jesus, connected by faith to a real person who did real things in history.

All of us are related to someone. We live in families. The Bible says, God **delights to set the solitary in families**. Children are related to their parents, and parents to their children. Why? Because they share the same life. And that is what makes a Christian, to share the life of God by relationship to a Person, the only Person who has that life, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At the close of this letter John tells us: **He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life.**

That which was from the beginning, he says, is a real person. We looked at him, we heard him, we touched him. He is an historical being. We knew him, we had fellowship with him, we lived with him, we ate with him, we slept with him, we heard his words, we have never forgotten them. This is the point to which all objections to Christianity are ultimately directed, an attempt to destroy this basis of fact. The forces which seek to overthrow Christian faith today try to undermine our confidence in the facts of Scripture, these great historical truths about a divine person who appeared in time. It all comes down at last to factual things, acts of God in history.

That is where John begins. He tells us what he himself experienced. We touched him, he says, we felt his warm, human flesh, we looked into his human eyes, we felt the beating of his human heart, and yet, as we did, we became aware that we were listening to the heartbeat of God, and in contact with the life of God. He took that life and laid it down in order that we might have it. He gave it to us through the cross and that life is what makes us part of the family.

Now he goes on to say, in verse 2, that this life **appeared**, was made visible. Twice he says it. He means that this eternal life was visible in the relationship of the Father and the Son. Jesus did not come to show us God unveiled; he came to show us the right relationship to God. As you look at the life of Jesus you will see this perfect relationship, this lost secret of humanity, this new way by which man is intended to live – a continual dependence upon the Father. Look at the earthly life of Jesus and this is exactly what you see. He keeps saying: **"It is the Father who dwells in me,"** (John 14:10). He is continually reminding people

that he says only what the Father is saying through him. He simply looked to God and trusted God to be working through him, leading him to think the thoughts and to say the things that God wanted him to say. In doing this he expressed exactly the mind of God. It is that life that John is talking about, a new way of living, a new way of reacting to situations in dependence upon God.

Easter is the end result of that true relationship that depends on the Father. The Father did not abandon Jesus to the grave, but raised him up to glory. In Jesus, we have the right, restored relationship with the Father. We are sinners, but forgiven sinners who are holy like Jesus in the Father's eyes. We are sinners whose bodies will die, but rise again by the power of Christ's resurrection. Jesus appeared so sinners would see what it's like to have a right relationship with God – to be his children – and to enjoy that relationship in Jesus.

And the result is a life lived like Jesus. It is a life where we must renounce our confidence in ourselves and recognize that God, working through us, can do far more than we could ever do by confidence in ourselves. It is a life where we recognize there will be an eternal effect when God is at work in us. This is one of the hardest things to learn because it is a wholly different way of life than the way our minds naturally think. But it is the life that appeared in the Lord Jesus himself. He lived this way. The explanation of that one unforgettable life is that he demonstrated what it means to be in God's family, to have him as your Father: you walk in constant dependence on him.

This right life with God appeared, John says, and now we are going to tell you about life in God's family; we are going to proclaim it to you. He says that this life will result in two wonderful things: First, fellowship, the most beautiful thing about family life.

What is fellowship? A guy in the Navy told me it was fellows on the same ship, and there is a sense in which that is true. They do have something in common: the same ship. When you have something in common with another you have a fellowship with him in that thing, at least. If you have nothing in common, you have no fellowship. We all have things in common. We share human life in common. Most of us share American citizenship in common. We have many things in common. But John is talking about that unique fellowship which is only the possession of those who share life in Jesus Christ together, who have this different kind of life, this new relationship with God. This makes them one and that is the basis for the appeal of Scripture to live together in tenderness and love toward one another. Not because we are inherently wonderful people or remarkable personalities, or that we are naturally gracious, kind, loving, and tender all the time -- for at times we are grouchy, scratchy, and irritating to others. But we are still to love one another. That is his point. Why? Because we share life with God together. We have that in common, and it overrides and outlasts everything else. We share the life of the Lord Jesus, and therefore we have fellowship with one another.

Ah, but that is not all, and it cannot be all. There is not only the horizontal relationship; that depends upon a vertical one. He goes on: **and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.** We discover that the horizontal relationship is directly related to the vertical one. If the vertical is not right, the horizontal one will be wrong, and, if it is wrong, it is because something is wrong between us and the Father. If we want to straighten out the horizontal relationship, that of getting along with our fellow Christians (and all fellow humans, as much as it depends on us), we must be sure that the vertical one is straight. Our fellowship is first with the Father and with his Son, and then fully with each other.

Here we come to the most remarkable thing about fellowship with our Father and his Son. It really takes two English words to bring out what this really means. There is, first of all, a partnership: the sharing of mutual interests, mutual resources, mutual labor together. God and I, working together, a partnership. God, of course, does not need anything from me, but because I am in his family he gives the privilege of putting all I have at his disposal. But in this partnership, the more you give, the more you get. Everything that he is becomes yours: grace, love, patience, and kindness. All God's goodness comes to you and through me. Is that not marvelous? You have it: a work partnership with God.

But it is not only partnership, there is also friendship. Friendship and partnership together form fellowship. Have you ever thought of this, that God desires you to be his friend? What do you do with a friend? You tell him secrets. And God tells us secrets. Jesus said to his disciples, "**I have not called you servants, but I have called you friends**" (John 15:15). He said this in a context in which he was imparting to them the secrets of life. Jesus is the Word of God in flesh. He was touched, seen, and heard, opening the mind of God to spell out secrets we never could have known, including the one way – through Jesus himself – to have true fellowship with God. The Word in flesh appeared to speak to us, and the Spirit speaks through the written word. God speaks to us as his friends – sublime, saving secrets from the divine mind.

We write these things to you so that our joy may be complete. Jesus came to give us the true relationship – fellowship with God – and each other. The result is joy complete, joy as complete as God's love for us, as complete as ours for each other. Amen.