A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

***“Fully Divine, Fully Human”***

1 John 1

April 8, 2018

The first Easter morning was not accompanied by thoughtfully penned hymn lyrics or well-organized processions. As you can imagine, it was chaotic, confusing, quite scary. The disciples’ world had already been rocked by Jesus’ arrest and death. Accounts of his body no longer being in the tomb, and the stories beginning to trickle out about sightings of him alive again, were confusing, even terrifying.

Think about what all the disciples didn’t know. They didn’t know what to make of the resurrection. They didn’t know how to articulate their belief that he was fully God and fully man. They didn’t know yet how to understand God as Trinity. They didn’t know what any of this meant for them personally or as a group. But they knew the world had changed. They could feel the cosmic earthquake rolling through all creation. Everything has just changed. And we are living right in the middle of it all. That much they knew.

They can be forgiven for not having all the doctrinal answers to every theological question that may ever arise. Right in the middle of it all they were doing well not to be overcome by the events swirling around them. Yes, Jesus had said something like this would happen, but when he’d said it they couldn’t make sense of it. Only now they remember he said things like, “The Son of Man must be killed and after three days rise.” “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again.” Ooooh, that’s what he meant. Light was beginning to dawn.

Forgive them, if you will, for not having all the answers. Won’t you do that? Not that we have all the answers by any means, but they didn’t know everything that Christians would think about in the years ahead. So, they didn’t know a lot. But they knew this. Jesus, their friend, loved them with a love they’d never known in any one else. Their rabbi, their Lord, really lived, really died, really rose again. He had flesh that bruised, blood that ran, a stomach that hungered, a throat that thirsted, a voice that taught, and eyes that seemed like they could see right into your soul. He had feet that got dusty and tired, and hands that broke bread and were pierced by nails.

How strange it must have been to them when within just a few decades after Jesus’ death some people were getting up in front of Christians and saying things like, “Jesus wasn’t really a human; he was more like a spirit. He didn’t really suffer on the cross; it was like an illusion. And his resurrection wasn’t really in the flesh in any way; it’s more like the hopes and dreams of those who loved him kept him alive in their hearts.” That kind of thing was said. And when it was said, some people nodded yes.

They weren’t trying to diminish Jesus. Around that part of the world at the time, really smart thinkers taught a high view of spiritual things and a low view of material things. Things you can’t see, touch, taste, feel way up there were good. Things you can see like food, human bodies, gray hair, wrinkles, blood, were bad. Or maybe they weren’t bad, they were necessary after all. Our spirits have to have some kind of container to dwell in, so we have our bodies.

And our bodies eat, sleep, grow old. That’s a reality. But it’s better not to think about those things too much. They’re kind of dirty. Kind of this-worldly. It’s better if you don’t think about bodies, or food, or trees, or rocks, or animals, or flowers. These are all part of this world. The unseen world is better, higher, holier. That’s what the smartest people taught. And they’d taught it a long time.

So, when people started saying Jesus wasn’t really a human, he just looked like one, they were paying him a compliment, or they thought they were. It was a high compliment. See, he wasn’t really human. God wasn’t dragged down into the dirt like the rest of us. He just made himself look like one so we could encounter him, but he stayed above it all. And besides, the idea of a divine being dying is inconceivable, especially one dying by crucifixion. God can’t feel pain. So Jesus must not have been human. Because if he was, the thought of that is intolerable; God coming down and becoming truly human, even unto death. A lot of people nodded. This sounded right to them. God was preserved from human mess and suffering.

This was just a few decades after the first Easter. The apostles who were still alive who had actually been with Jesus, like John . . . Can you imagine their reaction to this? They weren’t having it. A friend of mine, who was a seminary student in Durham, North Carolina, was invited to preach at a local church, which is usually an exciting opportunity for a seminary student. When it came time for the sermon, he walked to the pulpit and looked out at the congregation. To the student’s alarm, there, on the second row, was Stanley Hauerwas, the famed Duke ethics professor, known for having strong opinions and not known for keeping a poker face. The student began his sermon, preaching about whatever it was he was preaching about, to a congregation that seemed engaged in the sermon. He was feeling pretty good until about half way through he glanced down to see Professor Hauerwas’ arms crossed, eyes closed, shaking his head ‘no’, back and forth.

Picture the apostles, like John, listening to someone teaching in the early years of the church, who is teaching all this stuff about Jesus not being really a human. Imagine John, sitting there, arms crossed, eyes closed, shaking his head back and forth. John is remembering how Jesus tore bread and the crumbs fell to the ground, how Jesus laughed and drank and told stories and got tired and slept with his head on a hard rock. John is remembering the feel of the hands of Jesus on his calloused feet, washing them with a towel, remembering leaning his head on Jesus’ chest. John wants to yell out loud, “I was there at the cross. Were you there? Were you there whey they crucified our Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to a tree? Oooo, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there? I was.”

Possibly it was hearing something like that that prompted John sometime late in the 1st century, when he was an old man, to write his letter to be passed around to anyone, anywhere, who would read it. It is the testimony on behalf of the apostles to the whole church.

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us. . . “

The opening of 1 John is a powerful expression of apostolic witness to Jesus Christ. Lest there be any confusion, John tells the world, Jesus was a living man. You say he was only divine and only appeared to be human which is so ironic because during his life we knew he was unquestionably a man, we just couldn’t understand yet that he was also fully divine. But we came to know and want you to know too. The rest of the letter explores God’s love incarnated in Jesus as good news for salvation for the whole world.

That good news, incarnated in Jesus, is embodied by the church. As Jesus was real so the church is real too. That is part of what’s at stake for John. If Jesus was just a spirit, then the church is just a good idea, but not anything more. The church is floating around up in the sky for those other preachers. John brings the church back down to earth.

John’s letter clearly makes that known by his use of first person plural pronouns. By my count, in the first ten verses of the letter there are thirty-five times when it reads we, us, our. These are the pronouns of community and solidarity. John may have written this alone; who knows, he may have written it all alone on exile at Patmos, but John wasn’t writing it just from himself, but was speaking for all the apostles who also saw, touched, and heard Jesus in person and all those who didn’t see, but yet believed.

Those first disciples didn’t know a lot of answers. But they knew Jesus was flesh and blood and they knew as sure as Thomas’ sight of the wounds in his hands and the wound in his side, that Jesus’ resurrection was real too. That gave them the instinct, even in the crisis of Sunday’s empty tomb situation, to be together. The community of Jesus people must be as embodied as Jesus was. It’s not just an idea, not just a spiritual feeling, not just a concept. It’s flesh and blood. I was looking over my sermon notes last night when one of my kids starts running around, who knows why, singing “Get physical, we’ve got to get physical.” Well, ya, in a way, that’s right. The church is physical.

Kurt groaned when I said that Christianity is harmony sung in the key of We. Fair enough. But the point stands. Just as Jesus was in the flesh, so the church is in the flesh or it is nothing. The apostles understood that Jesus’ solidarity with humanity birthed a church in which relationships were tangible: body, blood, bruises, laughter, shared joy and shared sacrifice. The church isn’t just an idea floating up there somewhere. It’s the people, redeemed in Christ, the people whose love for one another and the world is made known by a handshake, a high five, a hug, the passing of peace, holding a new born baby, mixing ingredients for a casserole, sharing the suffering of one another. The church is as real as Jesus. Sometimes it hurts.

Martin Luther King was assassinated 50 years ago this week. Long before King was the exalted civil rights leader, he was the newly installed pastor of a self-satisfied Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. Don’t forget that King was a pastor, a Baptist. He had big dreams to grow the church’s Sunday School, begin a building campaign, and grow in the kind of respect and potential salary that a preacher can when he preaches like that man could preach. And then the Rosa Parks inspired bus boycott began in Montgomery. The young pastor was thrust into leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association as the boycott movement was named. His leadership was measured, controlled, modest, careful. He thought this would last a few days, accomplish a negotiated agreement for seating on Montgomery city buses, and he could get back to the business of being a preacher. It did not go that way. The boycott dragged on. His own people roundly criticized his leadership. He tried to resign. Nothing was going his way.

Then it got real. Charles Marsh tells the story in *The Beloved Community. “*In January 1957 King was stopped by two police officers on motorcycles after having chauffeured several black workers to their drop-off spots. The city was cracking down on all the ways former bus riders were getting to and from their work. King was charged with driving 30 in a 25, arrested, placed in the backseat of a police cruiser. As he sat alone in the back seat, he realized the police car was moving in the opposite direction from downtown, then down an unfamiliar street, then through a wooded area. King’s hands began to shake, “These men are carrying me to some faraway spot to dump me off.” He thought about his wife and two-month-old child at home. “Silently, I asked God to give me the strength to endure whatever came.”

The sight of the sign on a building must have come as an unlikely answer to prayer, “Montgomery County Jail.” King was fingerprinted, locked into a crowded holding cell. “Strange gusts of emotion swept through me like cold winds on an open prairie.” Slowly adjusting to the shock, he found himself the center of attention. A crowd gathered around him. Two acquaintances found him and offered hearty greetings, the preacher locked up with the rest of them. He spent the evening listening to stories of thieves and drunks and drifters, and in exchange gave the men a vivid account of his afternoon. That sounds a lot like church. Several asked if King could help them get out of jail. “Fellows, before I can assist in getting any of you out,” he said, “I’ve got to get my own self out.” And the cell was filled with laughter. (p 30-31)

He got out late that night, a changed man.

The pastor was killed in Memphis in 1968. I remember the first time I learned that King was there to support a sanitation worker’s strike. I thought that seemed so mundane. The great MLK was spending his time at the strike of garbage collectors. That seemed beneath his greatness somehow. Bring the man down in glory on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in DC. Bring him down halfway across the bridge in Selma. Bring him down, if you must, for big ideas, transcendent, ethereal, epic ideas, on a big stage. That’s a death worth having. But Memphis? For garbage men?

But you know, I’ve worked as a garbage man. That’s not a metaphor. You may not know that. I worked an extra job for a county landfill for a year or two, shoveling bags of trash, smelly, stinky stuff, some of it from the prison down the road, that would come in once a week. I hauled recycling. I ate my sandwich for lunch with the other garbage workers. Black hands, brown, or white, none of us could ever wash our hands well enough. King died at a garbage worker’s strike. That means a Baptist pastor died advocating for those men I got to know doing that job.

Jesus, John’s letter proclaims, died for the whole world. He died for MLK, for the garbage men, for the man that shot him . . . Jesus died for you and me. John puts it like this, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also the sins of the whole world.” It took Christians 200-300 years to find all the language to talk about Jesus as fully divine and fully human. We still stumble over our words with the mystery. But we still know what they knew from the beginning: God is love. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Indeed.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2018