

January 7, 2018
Who are we? Who are we going to be?
John 20

We are just coming out of the Christmas season. We have read passages that promise the coming of the Messiah, *"to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah 9:6). We have celebrated that Jesus *IS* "Jesus" (in Hebrew "Joshua") which means "salvation" or "deliverance." He is Immanuel, literally God-With-Us.

John begins his story of Jesus' life, saying, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (1:1-5).

What other Scripture does this remind you of? Genesis 1: *"In the beginning, God created ..."* Jesus' coming is the dawn of a whole new creation, a whole new reality, as dramatic and significant as God's creation of the universe billions of years ago.

Jesus brings light into darkness and life into death. Into a universe where we have unleashed chaos and confusion, where we have chosen darkness, where we like to think we're the almighty ones, where we are seduced by the gods of money, sex, war, and power, where we choose paths that leads to death, Jesus comes. He brings light: light to see evil for what it is, and light for a new hope. He brings life, new life that is filled and empowered with a new identity, new purpose, and new passion from His Spirit within us.

Just because we are coming out of the Christmas season does not mean this all ends. In fact, Christmas is just the beginning of what Jesus, Himself, describes as the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). Jesus, the King has come. The King reigns. We live in this radical new reality, the kingdom of God. We live as people of the King.

We are people of this new Kingdom. As Peter says, we are *"a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light."* (1 Peter 2:9). How, then, do we live in this new, amazing reality?

Skiping ahead to John 20 ...

What has happened between John 1:1 and John 20:1? Jesus has grown up, taught people, healed people, delivered people from demons, fed people, challenged the political and religious leaders, been arrested, unfairly tried, viciously beaten, hideously executed, and buried. It looks like the Kingdom of God is over. Finished. Jesus' friends and family are broken, discouraged, and disillusioned. Jesus' Kingdom dream has come to a horrible end.

Read John 20:1 **"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb ..."** **"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'"**(John 20:19). Jesus has risen from the dead. He is alive. His kingdom is alive, well, and stronger than ever.

What Scripture does this remind you of? **"There was evening and there was morning – the first day"**(Genesis 1:5). Again, John is talking about a whole new creation. A whole new reality comes into being through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener. Like Adam in the Garden, Jesus is bringing God's new order of things into being. In ways Adam failed to do, Jesus is showing us what it really means to be human, what life **"in the image of God"** could and should look like.

John says he has written all this, **"that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name"**(20:31). Jesus is the Messiah, God-with-Us; He has risen from the dead; He gives us life; He has established the Kingdom of God as a new reality; He has established His church as His Kingdom people.

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The challenge for our church (for any church) ...

Churches can (and do) come up with all sorts of cool slogans and marketing strategies to appear relevant, attractive, exciting, dynamic. Forget all that. Biblically, this who we are:

We are the family of God. "Family," specifically "the family of God," is one of the big metaphors the Bible uses to describe church. ***"To all who received him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God"***(John 1:12-13). We are sons and daughters of God, and brothers and sisters in/of Christ.

When, like Thomas, we believe in Jesus, we become full, complete, total members of the family of God. Even more than that, we are members of the royal family of the Kingdom of God. We are full-blooded, born-into-the-family sons and daughters of the King of Kings.

In the old days, being part of a family/clan/tribe was your fundamental identity. For example, Scots had distinctive tartans, crests, badges, and battle cries. Your clan defined you. What about us? Does our faith in Jesus define us? Some of us wear crosses as a sort of badge. For many people, it's highly significant; for other people, it's just jewelry. Being part of the family of God means more than just wearing (or not wearing) a cross. Our challenge is to BE God's family:

- To publicly wearing the name and be known as a follower of Jesus.
- To live, speak, and act in a way that is honouring to the family.
- To live the family values: unconditional/unbreakable love, mercy, forgiveness.
- To tell the family stories (Christmas, Easter), honouring the (healthy) family traditions because of their rich meaning (baptism, the Lord's Supper)

We are the body of Jesus in our world. On the one hand, together we are the body of Christ; we belong to and with each other. We all need one another. *"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ ... You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it"* (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

On the other hand, as the body of Christ, we are the Jesus our world sees. Jesus says, *"Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you"* (John 20:21). We are called to know Jesus and experience His love, and then to live for Jesus, sent into the world in the name of Jesus. Thomas wants to know Jesus, to satisfy his own intellectual curiosity. Jesus challenges Thomas to know Him more deeply, to believe, and in that belief to move forward. To take a (baby) step of faith. To walk with and be a witness for Jesus.

Being the body of Jesus means we are "born again" (to use Jesus' words in John 3:5-7) into a new way of life (or, rather, a rebirth into our original purpose in life). We are reborn to discover we are created in the image of God, to know and love God, and to tend and care for His creation. It's a new forgiveness, fruitfulness, and following of Jesus which is wider and wilder than our natural way of living. Our challenge is to BE His body.

We are the community of the Spirit. After Jesus says, *"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,"* John adds, *"And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"* (John 20:21). The continuing story is Jesus has given us His Presence, the Holy Spirit, who is with us always. *"Because you are his sons and daughters,"* Paul says, *"God sent **the Spirit** of his Son into our hearts, **the Spirit** who calls out, "Abba, Father"* (an Aramaic word we could translate as "Dad" or "Daddy") (Galatians 4:6).

In Acts, a group of cowering, uneducated, confused cast-offs, inspired and empowered by the Spirit, suddenly has the confidence to talk about Jesus, love people in the name of Jesus, worship Jesus, pray in the name of Jesus, heal in the name of Jesus, talk about Jesus far and wide, take risks in the name of Jesus, suffer in the name of Jesus, and even die in the name of Jesus. The Spirit of God does this.

This Spirit is in us, all of us who love Jesus (John 14-16). He gives us wisdom. He gives us strength and power. He corrects us. He teaches us. He unites us, drawing us together as the body of Jesus and the family of God. He inspires us. Our challenge is to let His Spirit to fill us, even in areas of our lives we hold back from Him, and see what happens.

We ARE the family/body/community of the Father, Son, and Spirit

Jesus' Kingdom, God's family, grows by Spirit-inspired love. This sort of love may suffer.

Jesus was not the kind of King who called down legions of angels and swept away all His enemies. His Kingdom is established through love – a deep covenant, unconditionally committed love. Jesus won His victory not by avoiding suffering but **through** suffering.

The early Christians loved and suffered. If you read church history, you find a disturbing refrain, repeated over and over: our church of today is built on the blood of those who loved and suffered, the martyrs of yesterday (the Greek word "martyr" means "witness"). The Spirit empowered them to love, not by preventing suffering, but through suffering.

This is the awkward truth: the church has grown the most when we love the most and – unfortunately – when we suffer the most. This is disturbing. For us, we confidently expect to worship and study Scripture without any real threat. A visit to the dentist is as much pain as we can handle. We call it a "war on Christmas" when someone says, "Happy Holidays." We cannot begin to imagine the suffering of Christians raped by Boko Haram, imprisoned by governments in Asia, gunned down in Egypt, or beheaded on a beach in North Africa. We cannot comprehend the systematic oppression, abuse and persecution endured by Christians who celebrated Christmas in counties like Pakistan, Turkey, and Iraq (churches with Christian roots in the 1st Century). These people love and suffer.

Jesus brings light into darkness, life into death, and love into a world of hatred and hurt. How do we live in the amazing new reality? We live as people of the Light: with hope, peace, love, and joy – even though it hurts. We love as Jesus loved – unconditionally, forgiving those who sin against us – even if we suffer for it. It feels counter-cultural. It is counter-cultural. Followers of Jesus have found when they are weak, they are strong. Hatred, prejudice, and oppression are destroyed by love, forgiveness, and grace. The powers of slavery, apartheid, oppression, and greed collapse like a pricked balloon when faced with authentic Spirit-inspired and Spirit-empowered Christian love and courage.

This is who we are: Jesus is re-creating us to be His body, His family, His Spirit-inspired and Spirit-empowered community of witnesses. We are a Kingdom of the heart: He is not promising us some kind of "Christian nation" where we feel safe and institutionalized (in more ways than one ☺). He is calling us to rediscover who He created us to be: people, made in His image, who love Him, boldly worship Him, and courageously serve Him. Being His people may lead us into hard places, painful places, places where we suffer. They are also places where we will find more meaning, purpose, and fulfillment than we can imagine.

We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light."(1 Peter 2:9). Will we live like it? Will we live as the people of light, people of Jesus?