

## **The Light of All People**

A Sermon Preached on the Second Sunday of Easter

April 27, 2003

At Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

### **John 1: 1-9**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

### **John 20: 19-31**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe."

### **1 John 1: 1-5**

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--we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that your joy may be complete.

I am named after a doubter, Thomas of the twelve. We heard about him in the second reading this morning. Thomas was not among the disciples when they first saw Jesus alive after Easter. So Thomas doubted that incredible story. He wasn't alone. That's clear from our 1 John text: "Happy are those who have not seen, but yet believe," it says. That text implies that there must have been some other early disciples who, like Thomas, had not seen their Lord arisen, and likewise doubted the Easter story.

Paul, who had never known Jesus in the flesh, believed he would be the last person to see the risen Christ. Anybody after him would just have to believe in the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of the testimony of those who had seen him. That's why the reading from 1 John starts out the way it does: "We declare to you "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." Those first eyewitnesses were testifying that they had known Jesus. They had seen him; they had heard him and touched him, both before and after Easter. People "untimely born" as Paul puts it--people who had not known Jesus in the flesh, nor seen him after Easter--would just have to take the earlier eye witnesses' word for it: The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed! Happy are those, who unlike Thomas have not been able to dispel their doubts with their eyes, but still believe.

My sermon this morning is about post-Easter doubt, and post Easter faith, in spite of that doubt. I won't try to speak for all Christians, but it seems to me that quite a number of us don't believe that Jesus is alive just because of the Easter story. For if I had no experience of my own to substantiate the ancient story that Jesus is alive, I probably wouldn't believe it, no siree, not just on the basis of somebody else's testimony, not even if that testimony comes from the Bible. For I'm a doubter, you see. I question authority, even if it's sacred authority. Maybe you do, too. Then listen to what I have to say about why I believe that Jesus is alive.

Principally I believe that Jesus is alive because I experience Jesus as light, as a kindly, life-giving light. I don't need to hear Jesus, or touch him to believe he is alive. I sense Jesus as this kindly light. I love the first verses of John's gospel, because they speak of Jesus in terms that resonate with my own experience: "What has come into being in [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

What wonderful words! With great conviction they declare that Jesus is the light of all people! Not just those who call themselves Christians. Not just those who think of themselves as religious. Not just "the elect," as Calvin put it. No, we hear the universality expressed even more strongly in the last verse of our reading: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

"Enlightens everyone", please note. With the Quakers, I believe that there is that of God in every person. What is this mysterious "that of God"? Well, I'd describe it as a life giving, clarifying, healing, and reconciling light. There are no "untimely born" persons in a world where this Christly light shines, because time means nothing to it. The Romans couldn't snuff it out. A misbehaving church couldn't snuff it out. Nazis couldn't snuff it out. Nothing in this whole wide world has been able to snuff out this light. It keeps on shining, even where and when it is least expected.

To illustrate my point that this light is the light of all people, and sometimes shines in the strangest, unlikely places, I'll share with you a story. It's a made-up story, but sometimes made-up stories tell us deep truths about life. Listen, and decide for yourself.

Jack Noland, played by Tom Hanks in the movie, "The Castaway," was a workaholic middle manager for Federal Express. Jack Noland was wound tight, even tighter than the clock he lived by. Jack was so devoted to work, he couldn't be with people. When a colleague shared the news that his wife had late stage cancer, Jack couldn't just be sad with him. Instead, he had to fix the problem right away by referring his friend to a wonder doctor.

All Jack's time was for working. He had none left over for anyone, not even Kelly, to whom he gave an engagement ring the night he rushed for the tarmac on yet another business trip. But everything would change for Jack that night. He would soon find himself with no one, and all the time in the world.

The Fed-Ex plane he boarded crashed in a storm that night, and he alone survived, washed ashore on a barrier island surrounded by huge breakers crashing on razor sharp coral. Jack was trapped in a place where time wasn't money. If there was something more to life than work, what better place to discover it?

Jack always had been bright and resourceful, so he figured out how to survive by drinking coconut milk, spearing fish in the lagoon, and taking shelter in a cave. But the thing that almost killed him was loneliness. Oh how he longed for someone to talk to! One day Jack cut his hand trying unsuccessfully to start a fire. In frustration he grabbed the Wilson volleyball that he had unpacked from a Fed Ex package washed up from the wreck. Jack flung the ball against a tree, leaving his bloody handprint upon it. He looked at the ball and thought he saw a face there in the smudge. He picked up the ball, and touched up the image to make eyes, nose, and mouth more definite.

That night, with the fire started at last, Jack began to talk to his imaginary friend, Wilson, the volleyball. Wilson couldn't talk back of course, but that didn't matter, because in his mind Jack would fill in the blanks of their conversation. Wilson kept Jack company, through months and years of aching silence, the two of them huddled in Jack's cave, the fire's flicker illuminating the portrait of Kelly in the lid of the pocket watch she had given him.

One day Jack had had enough. He climbed a rocky precipice to test whether the tree up there would bear his weight when he hung himself. But the tree broke.

Much later, he remembered that failure as a turning point. With a section of fiberglass outhouse that had washed up on the beach, Jack made a sailing raft and escaped the barrier reef that had imprisoned him for so long. A passing ship found Jack, and he was brought back to civilization.

As Jack swished the ice in his cocktail, talking to the colleague with whom he couldn't connect years before, and lamenting the loss of Kelly, who had married another man in his absence, Jack said:

"I was going to die there, totally alone. The only choice I had, the only thing I could control, was when and how and where that would happen. But I couldn't even kill myself the way I wanted to! I had power over nothing. That's when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket. I knew somehow I had to stay alive. I had to keep breathing even if there was no reason to hope. And all my logic said that I would never see this place again. But here I am, in

Memphis, with ice in my glass. One day, that logic was all wrong, because one day the tide came in and gave me a sail, and now here I am. I'm back. I'm so sad I don't have Kelly, but I'm so grateful that she was with me on that island. I know what I have to do now. I have to keep living. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?"

Jack was a changed man; not only leaner, but enlightened. He had discovered that there is much more to life than making money. Connection with loved ones is ever so much more important than that. Yet, even when that connection has been broken, and there is no logical reason to hope anymore for reconnection, one still may hope.

Who puts it there, this strange hope, this urge to see what tomorrow's tide might bring? Well, I suppose you could say that's just the way human beings are. "Hope springs eternal in the human heart." But why? Our text this morning says: What has come into being in [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

An old hymn rejoices: "Amazing grace! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." Sounds like Jack Noland's story, doesn't it; except that Jack's saga is secular. There is no mention of God, nor Jesus nor Holy Spirit in it. Not even prayer. No matter. There is a die-hard light in Jack, which wells up in him and covers him like a warm blanket, which projects itself through his own imagination and enables him to invent Wilson, the volleyball friend who keeps him from going crazy with loneliness. There is that of God in every person even if that person doesn't have the religion to name it.

That is our Easter good news, good news that reaches far beyond the bounds of this or any other religious sanctuary. The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world, and is still in the world; yes, even in you and me, though we be marooned on our own islands. Thanks to Easter, we too can look for the morrow's tide.