

Easter Life: The Rhythm
Acts 4:32-35 and I John 1:1 - 2:2
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
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Mirrors. There is something about the mirrors here in Florida. I don't know what it is, but every time I go past a mirror in our bedroom or bathroom or downstairs in the family room, I always look fifteen pounds heavier than I should.

Whether we like it or not, mirrors help us to see ourselves truly.

At the end of his life, Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." To him, philosophy – the love of wisdom – was the single most important human endeavor. Life could not be complete without the willingness to *think hard* about the meaning of our existence.

My mentor, Dean Thompson, would quickly agree. For us all of life is an opportunity for *biblical sensemaking*, to discern our purpose theologically through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Each of our Presbyterian confessions is an exercise in this kind of biblical sensemaking. The lifetime conclusions we reach about vocation, the moment-to-moment decisions we make as elementary or middle or high school or college students, as parents of young children, as professionals and executives and workers and homemakers, or as retirees enjoying Sarasota life, *all of it* involves biblical sensemaking.

As we look at ourselves clearly, we discover *who we are* – and together we discover the church, a church of one heart and soul, a church in which great grace is upon us all.

This is Easter life. We are Easter people. And this morning I John helps us to see ourselves more clearly.

Here we find the same rich imagery as the opening of John's Gospel. Jesus Christ is the word of God, the revelation of the divine self. Jesus is life and light. Jesus brings joy. He enables us to know true fellowship, deep connection, with almighty God.

Like poetic lightning, these first few words announce Jesus, the One who was seen and heard and touched, as the very light of God. Our joy is fulfilled when *others* discover God's goodness through Christ.

This means our orientation, our direction is always outward – out these doors, out these windows, going out into the neighborhood to proclaim and share and celebrate, to pray and serve and hope and forgive.

Each Wednesday at noon, Kelly or I lead a weekly Bible study. Right now we are studying the Acts of the Apostles. We have discovered together that the mission statement of all us apostles appears in the first chapter: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth."

We are invited to share our stories of faith. We are commanded to testify and serve. We discover joy when others come to the Light, when others believe and trust in Jesus Christ.

These first verses from I John are lyrical, like the very best song we know. Jesus, the One seen and heard and touched, is life revealed, the fulfillment of joy. He is the only Son of the living God, the Light without darkness. He cleanses us from all our faults and failings.

As we sing these words and celebrate these truths, as we revel in the light and praise the living God, *we are riding the wave, high above our daily lives.*

But the next few sentences come crashing down into the nitty-gritty: thoughtless neighbors, difficult co-workers, testy parents or impatient children, people at the stoplight or the Starbucks *who just don't seem to have a clue*. We read, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. If we say we have not

sinned, God's word is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

This announces the rhythm of the Christian life, the rhythm of Easter people: Celebrating the light, the love, the joy of Jesus, sharing the good news of the Gospel *and* coming face-to-face with our faults and failings, honestly admitting our sins.

There is no magic wand as Jesus followers. Becoming a Christian does not free us from poor choices. Oh, no. Following Jesus means taking long, hard looks in the mirror.

Scott Benhase is an Episcopal priest and bishop. In his recent book, he puts it this way:

"We want to believe that our views and beliefs are superior, that our judgment is more insightful. I know my own tendency when other people challenge [an opinion] I hold. Rather than . . . listening deeply to what they say, I sometimes ignore them as they speak, do not listen to a word they are saying, and begin to formulate a rebuttal to their position. Such spiritually immature behavior is the norm for all of us unless we discipline ourselves to respond differently. *This is a lifetime task. I am still working on it.*"

Theologian Paul Tillich is even sharper about the presence of sin: "Year after year, the longed for perfection of our life does not appear. The old compulsions reign within us. . . . Despair destroys all joy and courage."

That is the nature of sin. It slips through the cracks in our lives. It pokes up its head like a determined weed. It leads us far from the light, to tragedies of selfishness, greed, lust, envy.

In God's strength, we find the courage to look in the mirror. We examine our lives. We acknowledge the ways we fall short of God's intentions.

It is a tricky spiritual dance. We celebrate the light. We fall into darkness. We declare ourselves Easter people. But we still trip and fall. So we embrace this rhythm of sin and restoration, of repentance that leads to healing, of acknowledged brokenness that become the foundation for connection with Christ.

My best friend in college was Catholic. Nancy and I participated in group Bible studies. There were also a number of occasions when we would attend daily mass at the Newman Center on campus together. I quickly came to discover the most transformative moment of those worship services for me. In the midst of the communion liturgy, the priest would lead the congregation in saying, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

That is the rhythm. That is the balance of being Easter people. We fail. We mess up. We fall back. We discover yet again that we are unworthy of God's love. But that doesn't stop God from reaching out again and again. God heals us and restores us. God redeems our mistakes. God cleans up our messes. God declares us forgiven.

Anne and the kids and I have enjoyed a variety of vacations over the years. I can remember a special trip when the children were younger. All six of us travelled to Santa Fe, New Mexico. I remember going to mass at the cathedral there; the Catholics were the only Christian tradition offering daily worship. It was just the same last November, when Anne and I went up to New York City to visit Rachel. I looked for a Protestant tradition that offered a daily service of devotion, but the closest alternative was the Catholic cathedral in Midtown, only a few blocks away from our hotel.

The words of liturgy have changed a bit. But the meaning is the same: The Easter joy of Christ's resurrection is not just a one-time experience, a one-and-done image of beauty and celebration. No. God's goodness transforms and heals us, right when and where we have messed up terribly.

Friday morning I was driving on a rural highway when I passed a sign on the side of the road. As I drove by, I could only make out three lines, all in large, block letters: "I love you." "I forgive you." "Come to supper."

The power of forgiveness is greater than any other. It's greater than that first kiss, that favorite song, that winning basket, that home run in the ninth. Forgiveness puts us back on our feet. Forgiveness brings us home. Forgiveness makes everything right.

You have the power. You have the power to forgive. You have God's power, through the Holy Spirit, to repair and heal and make new. Who will you forgive today? Who will you forgive this week?

And just now, just now, the mercy is for you. God announces, "I love you." God declares, "I forgive you." And God invites you, "Come to supper."

At this Table, may we find the strength to see ourselves truly, to lean into the rhythm of confession and healing. Most of all, just now, may we discover the grace and beauty and wonder and mercy of God's tender love.