

Back in the 60's and 70's, there was a popular television show called "Dragnet." It was a crime drama that depicted the activities of a Los Angeles police detective named Sergeant Joe Friday – and accompanied by his various partners, they tackled routine police cases and faced new challenges along the way.

As a child, I watched old reruns of this show on a weekly basis, and I remember the quote that was often spoken by Sergeant Friday when he questioned a witness during a case. He would say, "Just the facts, ma'am; just the facts."

I like this quote because it applies to our Christian faith, and what I mean by that is our faith is rooted in fact – not "once upon a time" fairytales or fables, not some mystical experience, not the result a wild imagination or creative speculations, not hearsay – but facts, and these facts come from the accounts of credible and reliable eyewitnesses who recorded for all history what they saw and heard concerning Jesus.

This morning, we are beginning the first letter from John – the same John who was a fisherman and became one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus – part of the inner circle along with his brother James and Peter. John was the one who would care for Mary after Jesus was crucified, and it's this John who wrote the Gospel of John, three letters, and the Book of Revelation – all written to testify and to reveal the truth about our Lord.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 John 1** and we will read the first four verses. We are told,

¹What 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— ²and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— ³what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. ⁴These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

This letter opens with the words, "**What was from the beginning,**" – words that remind me of the very first words written by John in his gospel. In the Gospel of **John**, this is how he started:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through

Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Then later in **verse 14**, John adds this:

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

In this gospel passage, John tells us that Jesus is the **Word** of God, He's eternal, He's from the beginning, He's the basis for the existence of all things – and not only that, amazingly, He took on **flesh** and chose to reveal Himself as a man during His earthly ministry. In his gospel, John speaks of the deity of Jesus – He's fully God, and in his letter of **1 John**, he stresses the Lord's humanity – He's also fully man.

Now why would John stress the humanity of Jesus in his letter? Because in the early church, during the first and second centuries, false teachers called “Gnostics” had wiggled their way into congregations, claiming they had some special knowledge that no one else had – they possessed secrets only known by a select few, they claimed to have new and improved insights from God that ordinary Christians did not have, and they promoted heresies which created a lot of doubt and confusion about Jesus.

The Gnostics claimed that the spirit was good and that all physical matter, all flesh was evil. They taught that the spirit was separate and untouched by fleshly influences – no matter what the flesh did; therefore, the flesh could sin as much as it desired, and the spirit was unaffected. As a result, they led very immoral lives.

Now, on top of that, since all flesh was considered evil and Jesus was good, they concluded that Jesus did not have a real physical body – He only *appeared* to have a one – He only *seemed* to be a man. They suggested that Jesus was only a spiritual being, like a phantom or an apparition, denying that He was God in the flesh, and the problem with this false teaching was that it undermined the core truth of the Gospel – namely the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Think about it – if Jesus did not have a real physical body, then He did not really die and His suffering on the cross was merely an illusion. And, if Jesus did not have a real physical body, then He could have not risen bodily from the dead. So, without the actual death and resurrection of Jesus – there's no salvation for us.

This Gnostic heresy was very dangerous, and fortunately, these false teachers moved on – but the damage they created was done. So, John needed to meet this false teaching head-on by telling these believers what he knew about Jesus to shore up their foundation with the facts – so right out the gate, John makes it abundantly clear – he repeats the same point over and over, that his knowledge of Jesus, and the knowledge of the other Apostles who also followed Jesus, was based on their first-hand eyewitness experiences and not the result of some fictional religious beliefs.

Now, I learned over the years in law enforcement that when receiving information from someone, I needed to essentially evaluate two things: the *message* and the *messenger*, and that's what we are going to do this morning.

So, what was their message? In this passage, it was simple – God chose to openly reveal Himself, and the way He did that was in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the **Word of Life** in the **flesh**, and at the very beginning of His earthly ministry, the apostles – like John were right there with Him.

From the start, New Testament writers like John, and Matthew, and Peter – all apostles, had been with Jesus – they watched Him, they studied Him, they heard Him, they touched Him, they ate with Him, they lived with Him – heck, they were even chastised by Him.

They heard Jesus forgive people of their sins – something only God could do. They witnessed Jesus raise people from the dead. They were there when He calmed the storm and the sea. They watched Jesus walk on water. They saw His authority over demons. They saw His compassion towards the needy. They witnessed Jesus giving sight to the blind. They watched as He caused the deaf to hear and the mute to talk. They saw Him healing the crippled and the lame and the lepers. They were there when Jesus fed over 5000 on one occasion and over 4000 on another. They witnessed Jesus publicly crucified on a Roman cross. They saw an empty tomb – John was the first one there – apparently, he ran like a gazelle, and later they saw the risen Savior.

In fact, John had been present with the rest of the disciples when Thomas said, ***“Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”***

Eight days later, the resurrected Lord shows up and Jesus invites Thomas to put his finger in His hands and side, and to feel for himself that He had indeed risen bodily

from the dead. Because they were there, John and the other disciples could confess, just as Thomas did, “*My Lord and my God!*”

This wasn't some second-hand religious experience they were told about; they were there, they walked with Him, they knew Jesus face-to-face – Jesus was fully God and fully man – He was the **Word of Life** who appeared in the **flesh**.

That was their message, but what about the messengers? Were they credible and reliable?

Well, let me answer that question with a question. If Peter, and Matthew, and John fabricated their message, if their eyewitness accounts were complete lies, if they did not see the risen Savior, why would they have put themselves through the persecution and the terrible suffering, and even death that accompanied their message?

- Peter was imprisoned, and according to tradition, crucified upside-down because of the message.
- Matthew was killed by the sword in Ethiopia because of the message.
- John faced martyrdom when he was boiled in a huge basin of oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. After surviving, John was then sentenced to the island of Patmos because of the message.

And here's something I want to point out. It's not so important how these eyewitnesses suffered and died. What is important is the fact that they were all *willing* to suffer and die – not for what they believed – people die for their beliefs all the time, but they were *willing* to suffer and die for what they said they **saw and heard**. They were eyewitnesses – they could not deny what they had personally experienced – they knew beyond any shadow of doubt what they saw and heard was real, and they would not renounce their faith in Jesus even if it cost them their lives, and they wrote it down for us.

Think about that for a moment. We are reading a letter from a man who actually walked, and talked, and touched, and followed Jesus, but that brings up another question – after some 2000 years, and since there are no known original biblical documents, is this letter from John, and others documents like it, written way back when, still reliable in the here and now? Or asked in another way, do our Bibles accurately represent the original writings?

As a reminder, the original biblical documents written way back when were done so on materials like papyrus and parchment that were perishable, and over time, and with much handling by people, these written documents became worn out, and

so working from the original documents, copies were routinely made by church scribes.

Then there were the circular letters. This letter by John for example, was not written to a specific church or to a particular person – instead it was meant to be a circular letter sent from one church to another. A church would receive the original document – a scribe would make a meticulous, word for word copy of it, even count the letters and the words to ensure the copy was exact, then send the letter on to the next church, and so on, and so on. Again, over time and with handling by people, the documents became worn, the copies eventually became worn, and additional copies were made – and I say all of that to say this: just for the New Testament alone, historians have access over 5000 of these surviving Greek manuscripts, and when a comparison is done, they are 99% in agreement with one another meaning they remained consistent with the original writings, and the reason the 1% are found to be different can be attributed to minor grammatical mistakes.

So, the message is true – it's based on eyewitness accounts given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the messengers can be trusted – for in life and in death, they did not waiver, and we can be confident that what we read today is an accurate reconstruction of their original writings.

John proclaimed what he knew about Jesus – the right Jesus – the one he personally saw and heard and touched, and knowing the right Jesus he says, you may have the right fellowship with us – the apostles. In **verse 3**, John writes,

“What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

In this passage, John introduces us to this word **fellowship** which is an important word in our vocabulary – we say it all the time, but it refers to much more than a pot-luck social.

The word “fellowship” comes from the Greek word “*koinonia*” which has several meanings, but at its core, it holds the idea of possessing, and participating, and sharing something in common. Fellowship – *two or more fellows on one ship – they have something in common – the one ship.*

That's what John has in mind when he thinks about fellowship – he speaks of a common bond – he speaks of a shared partnership, and he presents this word “*fellowship*” from two different perspectives – a vertical perspective, looking

upward to our union with God through **His Son Jesus Christ**, and a horizontal perspective, looking outward to our relationships with other believers, and then he makes the connection that true fellowship with one another is the result of our genuine fellowship with God.

I like how Steven Cole explains this with an illustration. This is what he says,

Imagine that you have come on hard times. You're homeless, penniless, and you're sleeping on the sidewalk. Your tattered clothes and an old, dirty blanket are barely enough to keep you from freezing at night. Your meals consist of whatever you can find in the dumpsters. You have lost contact with all family and friends.

As you sit on the sidewalk, suddenly the presidential limousine pulls up to the curb. The President – and you can choose which ever one you like, gets out and invites you to join him. You get in and are whisked to the airport, where Air Force One is waiting. You fly to Washington, are driven in the presidential motorcade to the White House, where your own room is ready. There are new, clean clothes, all the food you can eat, and servants to meet your every need or whim. But, more than that, to your astonishment, the President treats you as his friend. He shares his heart with you and wants you to share your heart with him.

At first, you're so dazzled with this incredible change of events that you're only aware of the President himself. But after a while, you realize that you're not there alone. There are many others who have experienced the same thing, and as you exchange your stories and talk of how the President has helped each of you, your relationships with each other deepen.

That's an unbelievable fable, **right?** No not really, for if you've come to know Jesus Christ, there's some truth reflected in that illustration.

Jesus found you and me in the gutter so to speak. We were helpless and hopeless. We were lost in sin when Jesus found us and rescued us. In the salvation that Jesus provided, He included you and me in His kingdom and made us part of His family, and as we enjoy our fellowship with Him, we discover brothers and sisters who know the same Jesus we do and have similar life-changing – life transforming stories, and this common experience, this common bond with Jesus leads us to fellowship with one another.

Reuben Welch wrote, “*Christians are not brought together because they like each other, but because they share a common life in Jesus and are . . . learning how to love each other as members of the family.*”

Yes, it is “*Jesus and me,*” but God also made us for “*Jesus and we.*” Christian fellowship begins with a common fellowship with God, which in turn, leads to fellowship with other believers. They are connected to one another, and if our fellowship with God is neglected, then it’s reasonable to conclude that our fellowship with other believers will be as well. So, if you are not getting along with fellow Christians, you might want to look upward first.

Then John concludes the opening to his letter with a personal touch, and he says in **verse 4,**

“These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.”

John has lived a long and full life. He has lived in the presence of Jesus during His earthly ministry, and he enjoys fellowship with God. He has joy, but like a concerned parent, he links his own joy with the welfare of others – his spiritual children. John’s joy will not be complete until his readers clearly understand who the real Jesus is and walk in that truth.

In **3 John 4,** he says,

“I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

John was concerned about the welfare of others, so much so, that he could not experience complete joy himself as long as they were struggling with the doubt and the confusion created by these false teachers. And so, inspired by the Holy Spirit, John will write to reveal the true nature of Jesus Christ, he will write to reaffirm their salvation, he will write to encourage them to walk in the life-transforming truth of the gospel, and he will write to show them what genuine fellowship with God looks like, and how that impacts our fellowship with one another. If they do so, their joy will be made full, and in turn, John’s joy will be **made complete.**

If I could summarize these first four verses, I would say, *“Joy is made complete by having the right beliefs, in the right Jesus, and participating together in the right fellowship.”*

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