

1 John 5:1–6, “Children of God”
4/7/21 Second Sunday in Easter
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1 John 5:1–6 (NKJV)

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. ⁴ For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵ Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

⁶ This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.

What must we believe and do? What were the disciples to believe and do on Easter Sunday? Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to Mary Magdalene, and He sent her to the disciples with a message.

In Matthew 28:10, Jesus told Mary right outside the tomb, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.” What were they to believe and do? They were to believe that Jesus was truly alive after being dead, that He had truly appeared to their friend Mary, and that even after they had deserted Jesus and left Him for dead, He still counted them as brothers.

That’s what they were to believe. Jesus was alive and He loved them. What they were to do was to go to Galilee and see Jesus. Mary delivered the message, but to the disciples it seemed like an idle tale. They didn’t believe. They had thought Jesus was the promised Christ, the Messiah, but they saw Him die.

Later on Easter, we learn from Luke 24 that Jesus also appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He explained to them from the Old Testament Scriptures how the promised Christ had to suffer and die and then enter His glory.

Then that evening, as we heard in today’s Gospel lesson from John 20, Jesus appeared to the disciples and said, “Peace be with you.” What a thing to say! On the one hand they had been without peace for fear that the Jewish leadership would put them to death as had been done to Jesus. Jesus saying “Peace be with you” isn’t ignoring that threat. His peace cuts through the dangers of this life so that whether or not we suffer, whether or not there is cause to be troubled, He speaks peace to us in the midst of it.

On the other hand they had been without peace because they had broken their promise to Jesus to stick by His side no matter what and even die with Him if it came to that. Well, it came to that and instead of staying true until death they fled. Jesus saying “Peace be with you” wasn’t ignoring their shame and embarrassment and guilt. His words of peace directly addressed their guilt and shame. He had taken their sin and shame on the cross and was now giving His peace to them.

By appearing to them and absolving their sin through His words, Peace be with you,” their fear and unbelief turned to peace and faith. But who was this One in whom they had faith? Was Jesus a ghostly spirit that floated around from here to there? Absolutely not. Jesus appeared bodily. He was a flesh and blood person, not a ghost. John 20:20 says, “He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.” He had been physically alive, then He was physically dead, and now once again He was physically alive.

The disciple Thomas wasn’t there that Easter evening. When the disciples told him they had seen Jesus, Thomas said he wouldn’t believe unless he could place his finger into Jesus’ wounds. Jesus appeared again eight days later and Thomas was there this time. To drive the point fully home that Jesus was alive IN THE FLESH, He invited Thomas to place his finger into His wounds.

It’s written in John 20:26-29 when Jesus appeared as the disciples, including Thomas, hunkered down in a locked room. He said, “Peace be with you.”²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

What are we to believe? As Thomas confessed, we are to believe that Jesus has risen physically and is both Lord and God. The disciples saw Jesus in various appearances for the next 40 days and then He ascended into heaven. Just before ascending, He commissioned them in Matthew 28, saying “¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.”

As they carried out this great commission and proclaimed the Gospel of our crucified and risen Christ, some people believed and some didn’t. Others made an appearance of believing but didn’t actually believe that Jesus had come in the flesh, was crucified, and was bodily raised. This was a growing problem in the early church.

There were false teachers among the congregations who did not hold to the truth of who Jesus was and what He did, but instead promoted their own ideas. Read the New Testament letters of Paul and John and Peter and Jude and you’ll see over and over again warnings about false teachers trying to deceive those in the Church and lead them away from faith in Christ.

Jesus anticipated this (Mark 13:22) and so when He ascended into heaven He didn’t leave them as orphans (John 14:16-18), but ten days later on Pentecost He sent His Holy Spirit to comfort them, encourage them, and most of all to point them to Christ.

Before His death, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit in John 15:26-27.²⁶ “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.”²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.”

How would those who believed through the disciples’ teaching (that includes you and me) know whether we were being taught the truth about Jesus or if we were being deceived? The Holy Spirit who lives in your hearts through faith guides you in the truth. How? He points you to Christ.

How? He works through God's Word, the Bible, to convict your heart of sin and reveal Jesus the Son of God and Son of Man as your savior from sin.

Far from leaving you as orphans, God has adopted you and made you His own dear children. The Apostle John had this same tender heart toward God's children to the point of referring to the believers in his letter of 1 John as "My little children."

During this season of Easter, for six Sundays in a row, we are going to hear messages from this short but precious book of 1 John. Today's text comes from the final chapter and encapsulates the entire point of the letter.

What are we to believe and do? It's right here in 1 John 5:1. John writes to you, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God," [there's the believe part] and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him" [there's the do part].

What we are to believe, John says, is that Jesus is the Christ. What we are to do is love one another. God has begotten us, He has made us His children, by granting us faith in Christ. As His children, we are to love as He has taught us to love.

Jesus is the Christ, and we must love as He loved us. This is what we are to believe and do. It's so simple, but in the good confession, "Jesus is the Christ," John is simultaneously refuting heresy and promoting the physical and earthly nature of how God demonstrated His love to us and how we are to demonstrate love to others.

To understand 1 John you have to understand at least a little about the heresies, the false teaching, that John was refuting. Not long before John wrote this, the Christians to whom John wrote had seen many people leave their churches. John writes in 1 John 2:19, "They went out from us." That is to say, there were those who had been within the congregation, but then they left, they "went out."

John says in that same verse, "They went out, that it might become plain that they are not of us." That is to say, even when those people had been in the congregation, they had believed something other than the truth and were not truly part of God's believing church. Their exit from the congregation was a demonstration of what had been the case all along. To reiterate this point, John says in the same verse, "They were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us."

Somehow these folks who "went out" from the congregation had become deceived into thinking and believing things about Jesus that were not true. In 1 John 2:26 we learn that these incorrect teachers that had left were trying to deceive the believers who were still in the congregation.

John tells us clearly in 1 John 2:22 one of the big lies being told by those who had "gone out" from the church. "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son." Here John gives a literal definition of what it means to be an antichrist. He's not talking about one main bad person, the Antichrist with a capital "A." John is referring to anyone who is against, who is "anti" Jesus being the Christ.

Still, that's pretty strong language to drive home the importance of believing that Jesus is the Christ. Combine this with John's warning in 1 John 4:2 against those who denied that the Christ had come in the flesh and we begin to see the deceptive nature of the false teaching.

The false teachers weren't just saying don't believe in Jesus. The Christians wouldn't have easily fallen for that. The false teachers were undoubtedly saying nice things about Jesus, but then they'd slip in a teaching here and there about Jesus being a spiritual being, but not a fleshly, "Son of Man," human kind of being.

The false teachers that John was writing against would have been okay with the false teaching that Jesus didn't rise bodily on Easter but that He just rose in the disciples' hearts and made spiritual appearances to them. This is in direct contradiction to what Jesus said to the disciples that Easter evening in Luke 24:39, "Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have."

What are we to believe? That Jesus is the Christ. This Jesus, who came in the flesh, loved in the flesh, healed in the flesh, suffered and died in the flesh, and rose in the flesh, is the Christ.

What are we to do? Love one another as Christ loved us (John 13:34). And this is where the rubber meets the road in 1 John. And here too, every exhortation to love others is simultaneously an exhortation to live as Children of God who have been loved by Christ and at the same time they are rebukes of false teaching.

You can boil down the false teaching that John addresses to two ideas that build off each other. First, the false teaching that Jesus didn't come physically, only spiritually. Second, the false teaching that what you do physically doesn't matter, only what you believe spiritually matters. The false teachers went so far as to encourage sin in the flesh because they denied that anything fleshly or physical even mattered. But just as sinister was the implication that there was no need to actually help those with physical needs or to actually physically humble yourself and care for your neighbor.

In contrast to these false teachings, John gives two truths that build off each other. First, the truth that Jesus is the Christ who came physically in the flesh. Second, the truth that it is necessary for Christians to love people with physical help and compassion and hospitality in light of God's physical demonstration of love for us in Christ's bodily death and bodily resurrection.

1 John 5 does sum up nicely the dual points of the letter, to believe Jesus is the Christ and to love the children of God, but I think 1 John 3:23 does an even better job at hitting the nail right on the head. John sums up his whole point in 1 John 3:23, "And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He has commanded us." Believe and love.

What are we to believe and do? Believe in Jesus according to what Scripture teaches about Him and love one another according to God's sacrificial love toward you. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.