

“The Peace that Calms Our Fear”

Let me begin by asking you to hold on to something very specific throughout my sermon this morning. What I’m asking is that you keep this in your thoughts, keep a hold on it. I invite you to stay focused on what I’m offering no matter what. The concept, the idea I’d like you to hold, or let me say it this way, the reality I invite you to keep at the center of your thinking is this: *the presence*. Keep these two words in the front of your thoughts, *the presence*. “What presence? Whose presence?” you may ask. *The presence* of Jesus. Through what I share today and at this moment in our worship hold on to this thought, this concept, this reality, *the presence* of Jesus. My life, like many of your lives, is regularly connected to small electronic devices that have a feature called “notifications.” These notifications send me reminders of what I’m supposed to do or where I’m supposed to be. What I’ve discovered is that the notification feature is only as good as I am at telling it to remind me. In other words, if I don’t remember to set the reminder nothing happens. Up to this point in time, I’ve not found any app that will remind me to remember to set the reminders. So, ultimately, this is on us. With this in mind, I’d like to set up a notification feature-of-sorts in this sermon. The reminder will help you stay focused on *the presence*. Every now and then you’ll hear me say, “Jesus is with you.” When you hear me say “Jesus is with you” consider it a notification. Hear this as a gentle reminder to focus on *the presence*, the presence of Jesus who is with you now and always. I need to be reminded, too, and why is that? Quite simply, our minds wander. There are many things in our thoughts all of the time. We’ve got lots to do. There is other agenda for today. There will be other places where we must go. Every day we carry some part of the weight of the world, and this includes the pressures of our work and of the responsibilities laid upon us. There is the weight of our personal concerns. Worry spins around inside of us for ourselves, our families, and the world. So, consider yourself notified, reminded. Jesus is with you. Do you have it? Are you wrapping your thought around it? Jesus is with you. *The presence*. Let the reality of it sink in. Let it go deep enough as to find its way into your heart? Jesus is with you. Don’t lose your focus on *the presence*.

In the combined witness of the gospels, the writings of the early church give us the foundation of our Easter faith. Death did not keep Jesus down. God raised him up and the result of this tremendous good news is the fact that, just like with Jesus, death has no hold on us. It makes sense to say there is no message more powerful than this: Christ is risen from the grave. True enough. The resurrection of Jesus is great news but it is not the last word of good news we speak. The resurrection of Jesus is not the end of the story. In fact, the gospel wants us to know the resurrection is a beginning. In the way dying on a the cross wasn’t the end of him neither was Jesus’ death the end of the ways he impacted the lives of those following him. This is why Luke’s gospel takes us beyond the event of the resurrection. He tells us what happened when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples. This morning’s reading says, “Jesus himself stood among them...” (Luke 24:36) This was the crucified one. Jesus stood among them. This was the very one who suffered, died and was buried. Death was not his end. The story continues and that’s why Jesus shows up in the middle of a gathering of disciples. He wants them to know that his mission continues. Not only was Jesus raised to new life. His mission was resurrected, too. Jesus stood among them to make clear that God’s purpose through all of history was still unfolding.

Be aware of the significance that the risen Jesus came to stand among them. Resurrection is not a nice idea. Resurrection is not a positive attitude or a hopeful theory. Resurrection is knowing and seeing and touching and experiencing and encountering what God can do. Jesus stood among them, and that meant the disciples didn’t rely only on their memory of him. From that point forward, they’d do more than just tell stories of their experiences with him in Galilee. Jesus stood among them. This meant their relationship with him was just as strong and real as it had ever been. Church, it’s reminder time. Let us be sufficiently notified. Jesus is with you...Jesus is with you. Are you thinking about it? Do you have it? Is it in your mind and heart? Is it sinking in? *The presence*. Whether the first disciples were in a room somewhere, or walking along the road, and whether they were breaking bread around a table or doing their usual work of pulling fish into a boat, the presence of Jesus was with them.

Let’s say it again. This is good news, but not everything was exactly as it should have been the day Jesus stood among them. Did you catch Luke’s description of how the disciples reacted to seeing Jesus? Luke writes they were startled. In fact, he goes on, they were terrified. The disciples weren’t comforted by the presence of Jesus. They weren’t thinking, “This is great, the gospel story continues.” No, they were thinking, “This is a ghost!” When the disciples saw his presence it was just another reminder of how terrifying the experience of death can be. They were holding on to what had been. Death’s grip was wrapping them in fear. So much so, the disciples couldn’t begin to imagine how God was working to change their future. They were in danger of missing the power of the presence in their lives.

Let's be honest about it. Fear is a formidable foe. The truth is, fear can shut us down. I'm not generally afraid of heights but years ago I became frozen on a ladder. A group of us were working one Saturday at the church I was serving and the job was changing light bulbs high up in the sanctuary. We had a very long extension ladder and I climbed up to reach the light fixtures, except I could only get half way. It was high for sure, but the way the ladder was positioned as if in thin air, I could only go so far. My body froze. Sweat began to run down my face. I was toast, as we say. Now, fear can be healthy. It's a survival instinct but it can also shut us down to new possibilities. When we're anxious and afraid we tense up. Like I experienced that day, our muscles tighten. Our hearts beat more rapidly. We can barely move, but there's more. Fear can hold our emotions hostage, too. We become more suspicious. We're less open to others when we're afraid, more self-protective. We can become closed off, not only to what's happening in the moment but closed off to the future. Fear can rob us of our hope. The disciples were terrified. Church, let us be notified once more. Jesus is with you. The presence stood among the disciples. The presence of the risen Christ was among them to set them free. The presence was showing them the way to move beyond their fear. The presence of the risen Lord was there to make them faithful disciples again.

You see, the presence of the risen Jesus is with us not to prove he's alive but to prove that we are. When Jesus stood among them he said, "Peace be with you." This is the divine gift Jesus still gives. In him we find peace. How? First, we are reminded that Jesus is with us. It's the same now as it was then. It's the presence. Jesus appeared to the disciples in the form of a body and it's a body experience for us, too. When we gather together, as we are doing today, we become the body of Christ. When we come into the presence of others in the name of Christ we experience his love. As the church, our attention is consistently pointed to ways to serve. This is what Jesus told the first disciples to do, to go into the world in his name. Why? Because being in mission and serving others connects us to the presence of Jesus, who aligns himself with the those who are in need. When we connect with the least and the lost, when we walk alongside the hungry and the hurting, we are with Jesus, whose peace and presence pushes away our fear. Jesus is with us making it possible for us to follow him in this world. In his presence we are always able to move, to move faithfully in order to share his love and forgiveness with the world.

Everytime we experience Jesus with us we step forward with minds that are more open, hearts that are more loving, and souls that are more courageous. I'm not sure another reminder is needed. In fact, I don't think we'll ever forget it. Live this day with the certainty of the one who is with you, Jesus Christ the Lord.