

“With Us Always”  
May 21, 2023

Acts 1:1-11  
Matthew 28:16-20

In the final chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, crucified and now risen from the dead, meets Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they run from the empty tomb with a mixture of great fear and great joy. Jesus has a task for them that includes specific directions as to where he might be found: “Tell my brothers to go to Galilee,” the risen Christ says. “There they will see me.”

Now, those are very strange words indeed. Not because of *what* they promise, but because of *where* this promise is to be fulfilled.

Throughout Matthew’s gospel Jerusalem is *the* place. Jesus begins his ministry in northern Palestine, in Galilee, but it becomes apparent that Jerusalem, to the south, is his destination and his destiny. With his disciples, he sets out from Galilee toward Jerusalem, the capital city. He comes into Jerusalem, the center of religious and political power, in a strange kind of triumphal entry riding on a donkey. In Jerusalem Jesus teaches. In Jerusalem Jesus confronts the powers of this world.

In Jerusalem Jesus is crucified, dies, and is buried.

In Jerusalem Jesus is raised from death and appears to those two women who were among his closest followers.

It makes sense, because Jerusalem is the center.

We listened as in Jerusalem the risen Jesus gives the command: “Go to Galilee.”

Go to Galilee where Jesus grew up, where he was baptized by John; Galilee where Jesus called his followers and taught them and all who had ears to hear; Galilee where Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry.

“There”—not in Jerusalem, the center, but in the hinterlands, out in the sticks, on the edge—  
“There,” Jesus says, “they will see me.”

We, too, have often discovered that if we are to search for God—and certainly if we are to come in any way close to finding God—it will be in those unexpected places, at unexpected times.

We don’t travel to Galilee, but we work at the food pantry or we serve at the free lunch program.

We don’t travel to Galilee, but we seek justice for workers whose wages have been kept from them. We seek an end to the violence that plagues our nation, the warfare that devastates our world.

We don't go to Galilee, but we sit in silence before a work of art, or dance as though no one is watching, or sing as though the tune is our own.

We don't go to Galilee, but we go to our families and our homes and our neighborhoods. We go to work. We go into the wider community.

In the Galilees of our lives—out on the margins—we live out that strange mixture of wonder and doubt that is faith.

And from the Galilees of our lives the risen Christ sends us yet again to new places, telling both the devout and the doubters: “Go.”

The risen Christ doesn't say, “O.K. I've got this one. I'll take it from here,” setting out to make everything better.

No, he gathers his disciples—that is, those who have been taught, those who have been following along for a while now, those who are still uncertain about the meaning of Easter—and he sends *them* out.

This is the both troubling and empowering reality of the Ascension.

Troubling because it means that being the church is up to us.

Empowering because it means—well, it means that being the church is up to us.

Wouldn't you think that if someone were to be sent into the world, wouldn't you think it would be someone other than you or me? I can think of all sorts of better candidates for the job. We have our own problems. We're busy. We're tired. Some doubt.

And yet, even today, this is what we hear: “Go.”

“Go,” Jesus says.

Those who are hopeless;  
     those who are weary;  
         those who are afraid;  
             really, people like you and me at some point;

God sends the most unlikely people.

In our deepest discontent, when we are least satisfied with life as it is, when the pain of the present is finally too much, we hear the simple but straightforward call: “Go.”

When we look at this city, this nation, this world—when “compassion fatigue” looms at the edges of suffering—at just such times we, too, hear “Go.”

“Go,” Jesus says, and gives us a message of good news: “I am with you always.”

Many voices are ready to say that God has abandoned this world and so it doesn't really matter what we do: we can structure our economy and our society so that the ranks of the poor swell in our city, state, nation, and world as long as our comfort is assured; we can continue to follow the path of ecological destruction for the sake of just such an economy; we can let guns and violence proliferate as we seek our own personal safety.

From Jesus we hear something different. We hear good news. Not only has God not abandoned this world, God is drawing nearer than we would have expected. So, what we do matters. In the face of the nihilism of the world, we are bold to affirm that how we act matters now and it matters for the realm of heaven that is being established on earth.

We are called to be signs of God's love, God's compassion.

When we stand with people seeking a just wage...

When we provide meals to hungry people...

When we celebrate the equality of all people and proclaim the love of God for all people ...

We are signs—those who point toward the God who is love.

This is important. We are signs, not solutions.

We will not solve all the problems. By the grace of God we might solve some and others will be solved by other people. And some will remain. We will not solve all the problems, but *by our actions* we can be signs to the world of a new way, signs to the world that point to the God of compassion.

Do you remember the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew and those words that we often hear in the chilly days of early December? An angel appears to Joseph and tells him that Mary, his betrothed, "will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." We usually don't think about this story in the warm days May—but it speaks to us as much now as in December. All of this, Matthew tells us, took place to fulfill what God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Look, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us."

God is with us.

This is the promise and the good news that we hear all through Matthew's gospel—from the first chapter to those last words of the risen Christ: "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The Greek makes it more wonderful even as it makes it more specific.

While it is good to "remember," as the translation we heard this morning puts it, the Greek is more emphatic, more "biblical:"

Jesus says, not “Remember,” but “Lo!” It’s that wonderfully archaic word that we rarely use anymore. Lo! Listen up! Take note!

“Behold!” Jesus says. Here’s something astonishing.

“Lo, I am with you. You are not alone. You are not abandoned. You are not left to your own devices. Let that sink in.

Indeed, Jesus says, I am with you *all of the days*.”

When the sky above is gray and the horizon ominous: Lo! I am with you.

When the way ahead is dark and your plans are uncertain at best—Lo! I am with you.

When death takes someone from you, when death comes for you—Behold! I am with you.

Count as many days as you are able. Imagine countless days beyond those. God in Christ is with us—each of us, all of us, with the entire creation—to the end of the age.

“Behold!” says the risen Christ. “I am with you all the days.”

And, as I said last Sunday, any time we hear such assuring words, most of us can remember times when they didn’t ring true, times when God was known most deeply by God’s absence.

There are such times.

But I found some help and some new perspective from the poet, Christian Wiman, who has been living with an incurable cancer for many years now.

In *My Bright Abyss*, he explores what it might mean for our living and our dying if we acknowledged God’s *presence*. He says that:

There are definitely times when we must suffer God’s absence...But this is very rare, and for the most part our dark nights of the soul are, in a way that is more pathetic than tragic, wishful thinking.

God is not absent. He is everywhere in the world we are too dispirited to love. To feel him—to *find* him—does not usually require that we renounce all worldly possessions and enter a monastery...All too often the task to which we are called is simply to show a kindness to the irritating person in the cubicle next to us, say, or touch the face of a spouse from whom we ourselves have been long absent, letting grace wake love from our intense, self-enclosed sleep.

This is what Jesus means when he says that we will see him in Galilee.

We are closer to the divine ground of our being than we would imagine.

We can open ourselves to the new things that God is doing within us and among us and around us.

The risen Christ offers a new possibility and a new presence.

In the weeks after Easter, the followers of Jesus were trying to figure out the meaning of the resurrection.

We are still doing that.

The meaning is not always clear—and the meaning of the resurrection changes as our times change. But always, God is with us.