

## ***THE ABSENCE OF JESUS***

***(Mark 16:1-7)***

Through our joint mid-week Bible and book studies with our bridge-building partner congregation Christ the Solid Rock Baptist Church, I was confronted with a fascinating concept this past week that we really don't talk about or think about very much; and that concept is the *absence of Jesus*.

Our Christian brand is usually built more around the concept of the *presence of Jesus*.

✚ We call upon the name of the Lord in worship, and in prayer; and as we do so, we usually expect to experience the *presence of Jesus*;

✚ We come to the Welcome Table to receive the Lord's Supper; and as we partake of the body and blood of our crucified but risen Lord, we usually expect to experience a holy communion with the *presence of Jesus*;

✚ As we study our Christian scriptures, knowing that Jesus is the Living Word of God, we usually expect to receive in our study of the Word interpretation and guidance that gives us assurance of the *presence of Jesus*;

✚ When we give a cup of water to a thirsty stranger; or help provide food for a hungry family; or do justice work around the building of more affordable housing for lower-income people, we are taking to the streets what we want others to recognize as the *presence of Jesus*.

When we speak of the *presence* of Jesus, we are usually expressing the more tangible ways that we experience a relationship with our living Lord who has been resurrected from the dead. We speak of the *presence* of Jesus as we recall the ways and times that we feel Jesus closer to us than usual; or as we come to the rituals or occasions that heighten and strengthen our perception and knowledge of Jesus in our

lives; or as we experience the urgencies and situations where we realize that we need Jesus the most.

It is the *presence* of Jesus that we are usually going for as we travel on our Christian journeys of life. It's what we are longing for when we sing the song "*I Want Jesus to Walk With Me.*" It's the blessed assurance that we love to hear in the promise of Jesus himself in Matthew 28:

*"And lo, I am with you always, even till the close of the age."*

## II.

But I want to remind us today of something that is just as real for some as the *presence* of Jesus, and that is the *absence* of Jesus. The *absence* of Jesus can make itself known in some of the very same categories as the *presence* of Jesus. For example:

- ❖ There are some who don't always experience the presence of Jesus in worship, or in prayer. Sometimes what is experienced instead—for whatever reason—is the *absence* of that presence.

- ❖ There are those who come to the Welcome Table who—because of their state of mind, spirit or emotion—may not always experience communion with Jesus during the Eucharistic meal. Sometimes they leave the table hungry, because though the *presence* of Jesus can fill your soul, the *absence* of Jesus usually doesn't.
- ❖ Sometimes while we are studying the Christian scriptures, we feel as confused as ever, unsure of the message or its interpretation, and during those times some of us can feel more the *absence* than the *presence* of Jesus.
- ❖ There may be times when our charity or justice work may feel uninspired, rote, passionless, exhausting; and instead of feeling like we are taking the *presence* of Jesus to the streets, we can feel like the *absence* of Jesus has drained our energy and our purpose.

I believe it is a common experience in our Christian lives to feel the *absence* rather than the *presence* of Jesus. Sometimes, even when we

believe that Jesus is somehow present, we wonder where he might be hiding! We can look at or read the news, and wonder where Jesus is; we can watch hate heat up, and love cool down in our society, and wonder where Jesus is; we can storm the gates of heaven with our fervent supplications of prayer, hearing nothing but silence in return, and wonder where Jesus is.

Christian scripture even seems a bit schizophrenic when it comes to the presence and absence of Jesus. Even though in Matthew 28, Jesus tells his disciples that *"I will be with you always,"* in Matthew 26 Jesus reminds his disciples that he will NOT always be around. *"The poor you will always have with you"* says Jesus, *"but you will not always have me."*

That dilemma can end up being one that brings much despair to one who is faithfully seeking the presence of Jesus, but only experiencing his absence . . .

### III.

One way that we navigate this seeming dilemma is to remember that the presence and absence of Jesus doesn't only deal with how we feel; but has more to do with what we believe. Our *feelings* pretty much do what they want; it's what we DO with our feelings that counts. Our *beliefs*, however, are pretty much chosen by us after a while. And our Christian belief is that Jesus was a real, historical person who walked the earth with his disciples, and who is still very present—but not in the way that he once was, and not in the way that he will be. So in some very tangible ways, Jesus really IS absent. We can't experience him with our senses, like those who knew him when he walked the earth. We can't see him, touch him, smell him, taste him or hear him like those who knew him when he walked the earth. Jesus is not physically sitting next to us in the pew; or physically kneeling next to us at the Welcome Table. So there is a very tangible way in which the absence of Jesus is a very real thing.

As inconvenient as it sometimes is to feel the absence of Jesus, it can serve to keep us humble and grounded, not too pious and not too haughty. We can be reminded that Jesus walked this earth with others who were blessed by his physical presence in ways we cannot experience with him.

But Jesus did more than just walk the earth; he was healing and helping, preaching and teaching as he walked and talked, and showed everyone who he encountered what the love of God looked like in person. And because that healing and helping, preaching and teaching ran counter to the values of the status quo of those who were in power, Jesus was crucified on a cross, and died an excruciating death while hanging there.

But our Christian belief is also that Jesus didn't stay dead, but was raised from death—resurrected from death—by an awesome God of life and death and power and justice. Resurrected to a new spiritual body, not resuscitated to an old physical body! So, Jesus IS present, but

not like he used to be. Jesus may be on earth in a different way than he was before, but he is still here! Jesus promised to be with us, and Jesus IS with us!

✚ No matter how bad the news gets, Jesus is still here;

✚ No matter how detached we may feel from him, Jesus is still here;

✚ No matter how helpless and gloomy we may feel, Jesus is still here;

✚ No matter how much we don't turn to him in prayer, or how much we don't feel his presence in worship, or how much we may wonder if his "real presence" is in the bread and the wine, Jesus is still here!

Ain't that good news?

Well, here's some more:

For all the ways that Jesus feels absent in our lives in his present spiritual form, we are reminded that there will come a time when we will see Jesus face to face, in all his glory and splendor, in all his majesty

and might, in all his peace and power, and he feel absent from us no more.

1 John says *“Beloved, it does not yet appear what we shall be; but this we know: we he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”*

One day there will be no more guesswork.

When Jesus comes bounding from the heavens to set all things right and to make all things new, it will be only the presence of Jesus that we will be experiencing. No more absence. No more wondering. No more doubt. No more going with our feelings.

Because even our feelings will have no choice but to shout “Hallelujah!

The absence of Jesus is not a thing anymore!”

We will be comforted by the presence of Jesus in more ways than we can even ask for or think about.

Then we will know what the “real presence” of Jesus is all about! Amen.

