

Luke 24:36b – 48 “The Gift of One’s Presence”
I John 3:1-7

R.P.C.
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Imagine this scenario for a moment: A couple is standing up before their wedding guests in a church, repeating their vows in a Service of Christian Marriage. They promise to love, cherish and respect one another; but then after the ceremony, they refuse to live with each other. “O, she knows how I feel about her,” the absentee husband might say. “Yea, I’ve told him I will always love and care about him,” she retorts. But they decide they are NOT going to live together.

Hey, now wait a minute, we would likely object – personal feelings are not enough for a marriage There must be presence. An absentee spouse is no spouse at all. Love can’t really be love unless it becomes present to the beloved.

Our gospel text for this morning continues to narrate the wonder that the Risen Christ was not only raised from the dead, but also became present to his disciples: He “came and stood among them.”

The only way really to know someone is to experience them in bodily form, to be present with them. In fact, we generally don’t really think of “presence” as being ‘present’ if it is not a bodily, physical presence. For example, we can now correspond with someone in a number of ways – emails, facebook, twitter, ‘skyping’, texting and dozens of phone conversations. But as much as we can learn about that person, there is still a sense in which we do not really know them until we have spent time with them and they are bodily present with us. We can read those emails and make assumptions. We can try to fill in all the blanks; we can imagine the significance of what they are saying to us. But we cannot really, completely know them until they are bodily present. It is estimated that 90% of communication comes from body language, so how can we completely know or understand a person without their physical presence?

And that is what we believe God has done in Jesus Christ – been bodily present. We celebrated here on Christmas that God Almighty, the same God who hung the heavens and placed the plants in their courses, has become a human being. God has become incarnate – bodily flesh - in Jesus Christ, God with us.

And here on this Third Sunday of Easter, it as if the incarnation continues. It as if Jesus promises us, “When I took on your flesh, that wasn’t a one-time event.” “Now, through my resurrection, it’s a promise that I will never leave you I will be present to you – maybe not present in exactly the same way as I have been with you before, but still present with you.”

Luke says that the Risen Christ “came and stood among them.” Note that they, in their grief, did not come to him. The disciples seemed united in their desire to get as much distance between the crucified body of Christ and themselves as possible. They go back to their homes, they lock the doors; they seem to have begun the process of trying to accept the harsh reality that Jesus is gone. The one whom they so loved is absent from them.

Then Christ came to them. His presence was not some kind of extension of their grief - that in their grief, they had missed Jesus so much that they collectively imagined that he was still with them, even after he had died. His presence was Jesus’ own action; it was his gift of himself to them.

In a way, the Risen Christ was with his disciples in much the same way he was with them throughout his ministry. He came to them; they did not come to him. He touched the untouchables, healed the sick, fed the hungry, taught and loved all. In those ways throughout his ministry Christ “came and stood among them.” The good news of Easter is that his loving presence, his healing activity, continues. And now he continues to share the gift of his presence with us.

I don’t think we can ever underestimate the gift of one’s presence. In seminary, one of my professors, George Bennett, told us about an experience he had when he was first out of seminary and in his first church. One of the members of the congregation died, and George went by the house to offer pastoral care. When he got there he found the family members completely distraught over their loss; they were weeping uncontrollably and could not even speak. Being rather shy and new at being a pastor, George took a seat in the corner of the room and remained quite while the family expressed their grief with tears in the midst of the visits of neighbors and friends. After about two hours, George got up and left, simply saying “goodbye.”

After he got in his car he realized he had not even offered a prayer, yet alone offered any words of comfort. He chastised himself and wondered if he was even fit to be a minister. In the face of their grief he had simply been silent.

Two days later he officiated the funeral service. At the reception he approached the family to apologize for not being able to say anything in their hour of need. They responded that they were not upset at him at all, and actually appreciated what he did. For while all the other visitors were expressing what seemed to them in those moments to be trite words of sympathy, then quickly leaving, he brought and shared the gift of his presence and stayed.

He told us that he learned from that experience that when tragedy strikes, and there are “sighs too deep for words,” the most valuable gift we can bring is the

gift of our presence. Thus he counseled us seminarians to provide not words, but time; to give a listening ear and a gentle touch. Never say, "I know or feel your pain," because in those moments we cannot know the grief of those who are hurting, and they will hear our words as being disingenuous. Also, never tell them about yourself and your own losses, because in those moments they cannot listen, nor do they care. "We do not have to share any words at all," he said What is most important at such times is simply . . . to be present.

There are in the Christian Church, various beliefs and practices concerning the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. According to Roman Catholic tradition, when the priest consecrates the bread and the wine, it transforms them into the actual body and blood of Christ.

With the advent of the Protestant Reformation, that belief changed. Most Protestant Churches would affirm that Christ is really, undeniably present at our celebration of the supper. But for we Presbyterians, that means he is spiritually present. We don't affirm that Christ is ON the table, but he is AT the table, gathered with us in our celebration of this Holy Meal.

In the sharing of the bread and the cup, in the fellowship around the table, in the hospitable invitation to the table given by Christ himself, we experience the presence of Christ in an undeniably real way. Somehow the Risen Christ uses these ordinary actions of taking bread and wine to become present to us in a particularly vivid and life-changing way. Thus, as in today's scripture, the Risen Christ is among us, not in a way that is some sort of extension of our imaginations, but in a way that is truly an extension of himself – his true presence.

We are also to be reminded that the Risen Christ is not only present with us, but he us present among us, usually pronouncing "Peace!" That is, he is not only present, but he is also there pronouncing forgiveness. Those to whom he was most vividly present were his disciples, that is, the same ones who had betrayed him, forsaken him and fled into darkness when the soldiers came to arrest him. And yet, despite their infidelity, they were the first ones to whom he was most obviously present. What does that tell us about the nature of Christ? Was Jesus not roundly criticized during his ministry for fraternizing and keeping company with "sinners"? Every time the church celebrates the Lord's Supper or even a family night covered dish supper, we claim that Jesus continues to show up, to love and forgive the same sort of sinners and betrayers to whom he appeared after Easter. The Risen Christ became present to them - He became present to them as a gift of himself to them, as a consequence of his love for them.

A pastor was called to serve a church, and a short time after arriving there realized that the congregation had a number of serious problems. Though the pastor worked hard and tried everything he knew to do, it seemed that the pastor could not find the right combination for turning the church around and moving it beyond the past into the future. The pastor read books on how to resolve church conflict; articles on how to reinvigorate a congregation. A consultant was brought in for a weekend to look at the situation and offer some guidance. Goals and visions were formulated, and a plan for the future was developed.

Yet, despite all of those efforts, it seemed that at every turn of the road, things just were not working out, and the pastor saw little improvement for all of the efforts: The visitors who attended did not join in membership. The people in the community who were invited by the members, sensed that something was amiss and would not come back to worship. Thus the pastor became despondent, wondering if the church would simply slowly decline until the doors were closed.

One Sunday, the pastor trudged to church, feeling depressed as usual, not really wanting to be there at all. As he walked in, he was greeted by one of the members who had a whole group of people standing around her. She greeted the pastor with, "Look at our guests this morning." Around her stood a couple with a whole gaggle of children.

The husband in the group said, "You probably don't remember us, but we came to your church about a month ago looking for help." "The woman who helped us gave us some food certificates, to help us get through the weekend." "She then directed us to an agency that could assist us on Monday." "I had lost my job and we were at the end of our rope and didn't know where to turn." "That nice woman had prayer with us, and then sent us on our way with some wonderful and desperately needed help." "If it hadn't been for your church, we wouldn't have made it."

The wife added, "Yea, we had about given up, until your church reached out to help us." The husband continued, "Things got better for us right after that." "I got a great new job. We are back on our feet again, and things are going well." "I had to go out of town for a few weeks for training for my new job. Now I'm back, and the first thing we wanted to do was to come to your church." "We want to join and become part of this congregation." "In fact - if it would be okay - I would like to tell our story to the congregation this morning, and thank them for what they did to save us."

That was the day, the place and the hour that the church began its turn-around. Maybe even more than that, with the appearance of that family, the Risen Christ

became apparent as being present in their midst. Christ somehow showed up and found a way to transform a group of believers from a volunteer organization into something even more. They became nothing less than the very body of Christ.

Perhaps even more amazing was the fact that the faith of a despondent and rather defeated pastor was restored. The Risen Christ had taken bodily form before the pastor's very eyes. The Risen Christ had "come and stood among them."

This sense of the presence is the heart of our faith. This is the very source of the church. Thank God our relationship to God does not rest on our coming and standing with God. Rather our relationship to God rests upon a God who constantly comes and stands with us. Let's pray that our congregation will attempt to be the church in such a bold and demanding way that there will be no way for us to succeed as a church UNLESS the Risen Christ comes and stands among us.

Furthermore, on the personal level, we also need to pray that we will live out our own faith in such a way that others will give glory to God and say, "There is no way to explain the way that believer lives EXCEPT that the Risen Christ has come and stood with him or her." For we all know, that time and time again, by the grace of God, Jesus' promise, "I will be with you always" has been fulfilled in our own experiences. Just when we thought God had give up on us, just when we were at the end of our rope, just when we assumed that we have been left alone to our own devices, the Risen Christ "has come and stood among us." And in those moments he teaches us again the essential importance of 'the gift of one's presence.' Amen.