

Surely I Am With You
Matt. 28:16-20; Mk.15:33-39; John 15:1-8
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This week as students move into our city, how much energy and vitality they bring. As I watch students moving into flats or their parents dropping them off in the halls, it occurs to me that the experiences and friendships they will form there will literally last them a lifetime.

There's something about that mutual dear in the headlights experience, that not knowing where to go or how to get there; that embarrassing moment where you and your neighbor in the hall realize that of all the things you packed to bring to varsity, the one thing you forgot was a towel. Now, you're not a dirty person. You bathe frequently, but in the midst of your excitement you simply forgot that once you got clean, you'd also be very very wet. And so, as I stand in line at K-Mart for literally an hour, I can't help but chuckle at those obvious first year's standing in line with their towels.

Of course, some students don't make friends at uni. It can be hard to form friendships with so many different kinds of people. Doing well in your studies can keep you in your cubicle in the library, or in your room, and you can literally go through life and realize that you never made a friend, because there was simply too much to do.

Life, it seems is this never ending tension between doing and being. About working to cross off those to-do's, whatever they may be, and learning how to be present.

Presence it turns out is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus. And as we continue in Lent and look towards Easter it's a good idea to marinate on presence for a bit.

Paradoxically, this presence, this gift of Jesus, can only really be known through the gravity of the cross. And the paradox of Easter is that we gain fellowship with God through the abandonment of Jesus.

The other day, I was at the lab getting some blood drawn, and the tech asked me what I do for a living. When I told her I was a minister, she said, "oh really, what electorate do you represent." To which I replied, "the American south." After her brief period of confusion, she figured it

out, I was a minister of religion. To which she then asked, “exactly what do you do?”

My response was, “well, I really like being with people, but it feels as though I spend most of my time in meetings.” To which she replied, “oh, so you’re a Presbyterian minister?”

Life feels like this never-ending tension between working and being. I have work to do, and I have people I want to be with.

And within both of these domains, **working and being**², I also have a choice to make, I can work *with* or *for* people. In my own life, I’ve felt the presence of God through community. And so as a minister I practice a ministry of presence.

I do so because, to me, the ministry of Jesus is a **being with**³ type of ministry. I say this because God is a being with type of God. Throughout scripture we see that God is interested in being with us. We see this in the life of Moses, where God appeared in the burning bush; we see this in the Jacob wrestling with the angel; we see this in the way that God rescued Israel out of Egypt; and the way that God raised Jesus from the grave. This is why Jesus asks us to abide with him in order to bear good fruit.

This why the great commission is a charge given to the disciples together. Jesus, I think, was trying to make it perfectly clear: You’re going to need each other if you going to do this. Togetherness is at the heart of the gospel. This is one dimension of the problem of human sin.

Sin it turns out rends us from God; it isolates; separates; alienates. Sin isolates us from ourselves. It tears us apart from our family and our friends, from our communities, from our talents and work; and leaves us in a position that God can not tolerate. For It is not good that man should be alone (Gen.2:18).

And this is why the cross of Christ is a testament to God’s never ending desire to be with us. Jesus, of course is Immanuel- God with us. And If the son is with us, in flesh and blood, then the son is separated from the love of the Father. And being separated from the love of the Father is exactly what Jesus experiences on the cross in Mark’s gospel. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus cries out echoing Psalm 22. And this experience of the son being torn from the love of the Father, for

us, and for our salvation, is the true gravity of the cross. This is why the early church fathers believed Jesus had to die. God could forgive our sin from heaven. But only a human being, a flesh and blood, true human could, die and in so doing act as a fish-hook, hooking death and separation and destroying it once and for all. This is why God becomes flesh, and this is why Jesus has to be abandoned-Paul says becoming sin-so that a true human could be the savior of all humanity.

Of course, in order to be a true-blue human, Jesus had to *be with* us in order to be a real representative.

But wait, you're thinking, that can't be the gospel. What about the miracles? What about the healings? What about the casting out of demons? Didn't do a lot of work? Jesus did a lot of things. But, his doing was always in tandem with the disciples. Jesus was a *working with*⁴ kind of savior.

Jesus was and is also a *being for*⁵ kind of savior, and so we need to be a being for church. Jesus was practiced radical hospitality. He openly rebuked the religious authorities; he radically reoriented the Jewish law; He bravely claimed to be an agent of God's prophetic program both in Israel and the world.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes; he drank from the same well as adulterers. And this was no mere act of charity. For in eating with those on the margins of society, those that culture shunned, Jesus wasn't conferring status or privilege. Rather, in choosing ordinary disciples, and eating with the undesirables, Jesus was redrawing the margins of society, placing those that that the culture rejected at the very center of the Kingdom of God. And in so doing, Jesus was once and for all saying that it was those in power, those with privilege and perceived notions of holiness and obedience that were actually to be pitied, because it was they who were on the margins of the Kingdom of God.

And how did God show this? Through the gift of presence. It wasn't their behaviour or obedience that made them worthy. God's presence through Christ showed that they were worthy in God's eyes.

This, friends, is the mystery of our faith. That God acts first. In creation, in salvation, in transforming our hearts and minds. Grace comes first. There is no ladder to climb. There is no program to get on. There is only yielding and surrender and abiding and trusting that God will be true to

what God has promised, namely, that God has always and will always want to be with us.

And this is the ministry that God has given us together. This is why the church still matters, though she may be imperfect and a bit battered. The prophetic program of God is something that can only be done **together**. This is why Paul tells us we are a body. And not just some generic metaphorical body, but a real true spiritual reality.

If the life of Jesus is meant to be more than a metaphorical illustration, if it is meant to be a normative example for what it means to be a person of God, a person walking in unity with God's purposes, both for our own lives and the life of the world, then we must begin to see that Jesus spent **two weeks**⁶ working for our salvation in Jerusalem. He spent **three years** *working with* the disciples and being for the marginalized. And he spent **thirty years** in Nazareth, *being with us*, one of us, laughing, crying, learning a trade, playing with his siblings, worshipping in the synagogue.

And in some ways this *being with*, this ministry of presence, this Abiding is countercultural and revolutionary. If you a person who likes to be doing something, let me just suggest that there is something powerful in slowing down. God's time is not like our time. **Augustine**, the fourth century church father once wrote that time was part of God's creation. However, like the rest of creation, time is fallen and fractured, and as such, must be redeemed. And so, when we practice the ministry of presence we participate in the redemption of time. So, there's a certain holiness to both working and wasting time together.

John Wesley's last words are recorded to have been these: **The best of all, is God is with us**⁷. God knows that reaching people is hard, and that's why we are promised over and over that God is with us. In fact, those words are the most common to be found in scripture. Surely I am with you. I will never leave you nor abandon you.

This being with us is why Christianity holds to the resurrection. For just as we see the separation of Jesus from the love of the Father on the cross, the resurrection bears witness to the power of God's love; a love able and willing to do whatever is required in order to secure God's loving presence with the son and with us all. This is why we can say that death does not have the last word. The resurrection is a demonstration that the love of the father and the love of the son are inseparable; how much more then can we say that in our life together the love of God is

made manifest. How much more can we say then that we live in the shadow of the cross and empty tomb; that we are easter people; that we were made to be with God and each other. In doing so, we draw closer to the central vine. By doing this with each other we bear food fruit. By focusing our ministry on those on the margins we demonstrate that we are blessed to be a blessing, and that God has always been, is, and will always be for us. Surely, I am with you, even to the end of the age.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.