

How Does He “Be with Us”?
Rev. Darrell Johnson, Senior Minister
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Text: Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-11
Title: How Does He “Be with Us”?
Series: The Space in Which He Calls Us to Follow

Jesus of Nazareth is risen! Jesus of Nazareth is alive! I will never tire declaring this good news. The good news that came out of Jerusalem cemetery. The flesh and blood Man who touched and healed broken bodies; who touched and healed broken minds. The Man who suffered the unimaginable pain and crucifixion. That Jesus. That Man. Risen! Alive! Now and forever.

So what does it all mean for life in the city? In particular, what does it all mean for being and doing church in this city? We say at FBC “We are a community following Jesus”. What does that mean? Following? Following Jesus? How do we do that in this city? What does it look like at this time in history? What does it mean to be ‘a community following’ the risen, living Jesus?

Not many days after His resurrection, Jesus met eleven of His first followers on a mountain somewhere in Galilee. On that mountain the risen, living Jesus makes a great claim, gives a great commission and promises a great comfort. And in so doing opens up for the space in which He now calls us to follow. In the space shaped by His great claim, His great Commission and His great Comfort.

The more I reflect on the claim, the commission, the comfort, the more the word “great” gives way to the word “huge”. On the mountain after His resurrection Jesus makes a huge claim, gives a huge commission and promises a huge comfort. Since last Sunday I have walked through our city feeling just how huge it all is; how crazy it all is if it is not true. Indeed, as I rode the subway and looked at faces of people from so many different nations of the world as I walked past Sears and Robson Square and the Law Courts and Tim Horton’s and the Sutton Place and the Wall centre the word “huge” gave way to the word “gigantic”.

On the mountain after His resurrection Jesus makes a gigantic claim, gives a gigantic commission and promises a gigantic comfort. And following Jesus in this city being and doing Christ in the city is all about coming to terms with his great claim, finding ways to obey His great commission and learning to live in his great comfort. I invite you to focus today on the great comfort. “look” says Jesus, “I am with you all the days... even unto the end of the age.” A hugely gigantic comfort.

But before we focus on it let us briefly review the great claim and the great commission. The great claim “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me”. I do not

know of any other person in history who dared to make such a claim. Oh, some have bordered on it. But everyone knew they were a little “off”; that they were megalomania narcissists. No-one who met Jesus ever thought “megalomania narcissists”. Everyone who spent time with Jesus of Nazareth thought “here is the real deal”, “here is humanity at its very best”.

And He stands on the mountain after His resurrection and says, as a matter of fact, no fanfare, no hype, no lights and cameras just as a matter of fact “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me”. As Dale Bruner renders Jesus words “I am the Chief executive Officer of the Universe”. And as an early Christian hymn, sung by the Church in Philippi puts it: “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” (Phil 2:5-11)

The great commission. “Go, disciple all the nations”. But of course! Go, disciple all the people of the earth into the reality of the great claim. Go, help them enter into the full, life-giving consequences of the great claim.

“Baptizing them”, says Jesus. Not just immersing them into water. But immersing them into the reality signified by the water. Immerse then into the death and resurrection of Jesus. And immerse them into God’s new name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Help them enter into and then live in the life of God as father, Son and Holy Spirit. Holy molly!

“Teaching them”, says Jesus; “Teaching them to observe all I have commanded you”. Eugene Peterson in the Message paraphrases Jesus to say “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near in this way of life. . . instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.”

“All I have commanded you”. As the one who has all authority, He has the right not only to give “helpful hints on living well”, to raise “possibilities for a better you”, to suggest “options one might want to consider”. He has the right to command. Teach the nations of the world, teach the city to actually do what I have commanded. Especially live and teach the two great commandments, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind with all your strength”; and “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34) It is one thing to love as we love ourselves. Doing only that would radically transform any city. But love as He loves? Giving ourselves away? Laying down our lives? Can you imagine what the city would look like if that kind of love happened?

And the great comfort “Look! I am with you all the days”. The space in which He calls us to follow, the space in which we are coming to terms with his great claim and finding ways to obey His great commission is a space in which we are learning to live in His great comfort. “Look!” He says. “Behold!” A command. The imperative form of the verb “to see”. Look! One of Jesus’ favourite commands! Look! “I am with you” “I am with you always.” The implication being: “I will leave you nor forsake you”. (Hebrews 13:5)

The question is “How?” How is He with us? The answer takes us deep into the mystery of the space in which He calls us to follow. The answer takes us into deep theological

waters. Much greater minds than mine have for centuries wrestled with what it all means. For given the state of being in which Jesus now exists is it possible for Him to be with us at all times? How can he be with us at all times when in the nature of things it appears He cannot be with all of us at all times. You see Jesus is not only risen; He is also ascended. In His body with the limitations bodily existence implies.

For 40 days after his resurrection Jesus met with his first community of followers. Acts, chapter one, verse three: “To His disciples He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the Kingdom of God”.

Oh to have been there! I read the opening paragraphs of Acts and say, “Did anyone record those sessions?”

For 40 days the Risen Jesus kept teaching them and preparing them for what was to come. In particular, preparing them for His departure, for His ascension. For 40 days He met with the first community of followers in his flesh and blood body in which He lives as Risen Lord. But at the end of the 40 days He departs from them in his flesh and blood.

Acts 1:9 “ Why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, Who has been taken up into heaven, will come in just the same way as you watched Him go into heaven.”

“Taken up” into heaven in His body. One day to return as He left in his body. The first community of followers rejoiced that Jesus is risen and alive and rejoiced that He has ascended into heaven. Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 9 and 10: He who descended is He Who ascended “far above all the heavens”. Or as another early Christian Hymn recorded in 1 Timothy, chapter 3, verse 16, puts it: “He Who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, Beheld by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world. Taken up in glory.” Taken up in His flesh with the limitations that imply.

It is the mystery in the great comfort. The Risen Jesus has ascended into heaven in His flesh and blood body. In His full humanity. A human being now sits on the throne of the universe! The human being. The Man. Yes, he is the God-Man. Jesus of Nazareth is fully human and fully divine. The God-Man now sits on the throne. But the God-Man sits as Man, as Human with the limitations that implies. How then can he be with all His disciples all the days? What I am trying to say is the incarnation goes on! “The word became flesh and dwelt among us”, says John. God became a human being! But not just for 33-years. God became a human being forever. God the Son became a human being forever. That is how much God love the world. That is how much the Creator loves creation. God the Father sent God the Son to become one of us forever. In the womb of the virgin Mary He became a fully- en-flesh man. And remains so forever. Again. He is risen bodily. Not some kind of phantom, some kind of ghostly-being. And He is ascended bodily. Not as some kind of phantom-being. He is ascended in the flesh and blood body He had on Easter morning.

I think most people think that when Jesus was “lifted-up”, when he was “taken-up”, he shed His flesh and blood. I think most people think that when “the cloud received Him out of their sight”, as Luke puts it, Jesus somehow left to limitations of body existence and kind of morphed into a bodily-less being so he could be everywhere a tall times. I know that is what I unconsciously thought for years. But this is not the case. When Jesus was risen from the dead in His humanity, ascended into heaven, he did not set aside His humanity. He went into heaven. He ascended to the throne in His humanity in the particularity of His human body. To put it in startling terms: when God the Father now looks at God the Son he sees a human face. When God the Father now hears God the Son the Father hears a human voice. As theologian Garriet Dawson puts it: “What was never in heaven before, human flesh, is now there” in the ascended Jesus. (The Ascended Jesus, 111) “Dust” Our dust “sits at the right hand of the father!”(ibid)

He is descended from heaven to earth to become one of us ascended from earth to heaven as one of us. In the virgin’s womb He became what for all eternity He was not; He became flesh and blood. This is “the Grand Miracle” as C.S. Lewis called it. He Who made flesh and blood became flesh and blood. He then lived our flesh and blood life for 33 years. He lived a true, authentic human life as a true, authentic human being. Indeed, as the truest and most authentic human being. He then dies our own flesh and blood death. And rose from the grave as our own flesh and blood. Transformed, yes: healed, cleansed, re-created. He is risen in His flesh and blood. And He is ascended in his flesh and blood. He Who descended into human flesh and blood-ness ascended in human flesh-and-blood-ness with human flesh-and –blood-ness. “In our skin”, so to speak.

Jesus is Immanuel; God with us. God with us in the flesh. Not only was He a man for 33 years. He is still a man. And always will be a man. A man is now on the throne. Or as NT Wright is putting it, “A human being is now at the helm of the universe.” If we could see through the cloud, is we could peak through the curtain ad see the heavenly court where Jesus now is we would see a glorious throne, no doubt. And we would see a man sitting in it. Not a dis-embodies something but a man with scars in His hands and feet. Quoting Garret Dawson again: “A human hand will grasp us as we make our way into heaven. We shall be greeted by a human face. . . the face of Jesus (of Nazareth) that has a form we recognize.” (7) Again the ascension does not “de-humanize Jesus” (Douglas Farron, Ascension and Ecclesia, 12) God became a man forever. His flesh-and-blood-ness say Karl Barth, “is a clothing which he does not put off. It is a temple that e does not leave”. (in Farron, 242) God the Son became a man. And still is a man. And always will be man. With the limitations that it involves. So where is He? An how can he then “be with us?” Where is He? I do not know. It is one of the great unanswered questions of Christian theology. He did not ????? into a disembodied state of being. He is till the Man the first disciples touched and held. But where? Where is He? Because he is still human he cannot be everywhere. Yes, He is the God-Man. But even during those 33 years on earth, being the God-Man meant living with the limitations of flesh-and-blood-ness. He could not be in two places at the same time. If He was in Nazareth he could not be in Jerusalem. So where now is He , is the Man? And how can He thus “be with” us? How can He “be with” us in Vancouver and “be with” disciples in London and Moscow and in New Delhi and in Beijing? How can we in so many difficult places relate to Him?

How can we in so many different locations have “a personal relationship” with Him? How can He fulfill the promise of the great Comfort, to all His followers? “look! I am with you all the days”.

You can see now why the first community of followers longed for the second-coming. You can see now why every time they gathered for worship they prayed, “Maranatha”, “Come, Lord”. For we will not be able to fully know Jesus in His humanity until He comes again and takes us to where He is. When we realize Jesus has ascended in His humanity it awakens a passionate longing for Him to come and when we will behold Him face to face; when He literally puts His arms around us.

You can also now see why the apostle Paul says what He does in his letter to the community of disciples in Colossae. Colossians 3:1-2: “Keep seeking the things above, Where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above.” This is not other-worldedness. It is just that Paul longs to know Jesus to the fullest extent. And, therefore, longs to be where Jesus in His humanity is.

So I ask again how does Jesus “be with” all His disciples all the days?

As I read the New Testament before He comes again He is with us in five ways. The first being the most important.

First, he is with us in His Body, the Church. We who follow Him constitute His Body in the world. And somehow, we meet Jesus in one another. A little girl says to her mother, “I want Jesus with skin on.” That is what we are to one another. The Church is Jesus with skin on. Not that any of us is Jesus! It is just that somehow the risen and ascended Jesus meets us in the humanity of one another. The apostle Paul learned this on the road to Damascus. He is on his way to hassle disciples of Jesus. He is knocked off his horse by a bright light. Paul cries out, “Who e You, Lord?” And a voice says, “I am Jesus Whom you are persecuting”. That is the genesis of Paul’s theology of the church is the Body of Christ. Paul came to see that in persecuting Jesus’ followers he was persecuting Jesus. Mess with Jesus’ followers and you discover you are messing with Jesus. Serve Jesus’ followers and you discover you are serving Jesus.

This is why we need each other. And this is why we need to be in some kind of small group. He comes to us from wherever it is He now is through one another.

A second way the Lord’s Supper. Somehow the ascended Jesus meets us at the Table. As we eat the bread and drink the wine (or juice). Somehow He comes to us. Not that the bread becomes His flesh; not that the wine becomes His blood. The physicality of the bread and the physicality of the wine remind us of the physicality of His ascended flesh and blood. And somehow, as we eat and drink together as His Body, He is “with us”. He, somehow, comes to us from wherever it is He now is in the Holy Meal.

A third way. In ministry. As we serve the least, the last, the lost, we somehow meet the Man at the helm of the universe. In His famous parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus

tells us that as we serve the least, the last and the lost, we serve Him! Not that the least, the last, the lost are Jesus. It is just that somehow the ascended Jesus comes to us; somehow we touch Him and He touches us. Those we serve.

Which is why we simply have to give ourselves to some sort of ministry. We cannot know the risen Jesus, we cannot connect with Him without being engaged in some specific, connected service.

A fourth way. The Bible. He meets us in the Bible. Not that the Bible is some kind of magical book. It is just that He has chosen to meet us in its pages. We cannot separate Jesus and His word. We know Him as he speaks. When He speaks, He comes, He is present. As we open His Book, he speaks and somehow He emerges from the pages. Not unlike a Richard Scarry pop-up-book; open the pages and we enter the reality the pages are describing.

As E Stanley Jones used to put it:

“Everyday I go to these words and I ask them; “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?” And the words take me by the hand and lead me beyond the words to Him who is the word.”

I cannot imagine trying to follow Jesus without living in His word. If we begin the day only by turning on the TV or computer. Or reading the newspaper, we are not going to realize the space in which we are living. We need to live in the Word so we see Jesus in the midst of it all. This is why we are going to be developing more opportunities for people to be engaging Scripture. I dream of some sort of opportunity to study being offered every day of the week.

He comes to us from wherever it is He now is through the open Book. He meets us in the pages of the Bible.

And the fifth way. The most important way. The way that makes all the other ones work. He comes to us in the Person of the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus especially emphasized those 40 days after His resurrection and before His ascension. He sends His Spirit to live with us. He and God the father sent God the Spirit to live with us. And the Spirit, blessed be his name, somehow makes Jesus real to us. It is the Spirit's number one job – make Jesus real to us. As John Calvin emphasized, the Spirit is not a substitute for Jesus. Rather, He is a link to Jesus. Because the Spirit is not limited by the flesh-and-blood man, He can be everywhere at all times. And can, therefore, make Jesus real everywhere, at all times. That is the great comfort. That is the mystery of the space in which we follow.

As Canadian Theologian Douglas Farrow says: “the ascended Lord is not everywhere but he is everywhere accessible” (178)

In His humanity the ascended Lord cannot be everywhere but because of the person of the Holy Spirit the ascended Lord is accessible everywhere.

You can see then why the New Testament speaks so much of the Spirit. Following Jesus in the world is impossible without the Spirit. The whole Christian Life, is by necessity, life in and with the Spirit. The Spirit links us to the Ascended Jesus. So that even in the limitations of His bodily existence, Jesus can be with us.

The space in which we now follow is filled with the Spirit, with a person. Not just with a Power. Not just with an Influence. The space is filled with a Person. Learning to live in this great comfort is what following the Risen and Ascended Jesus is all about.