

“Christ in Our Midst”

Date: April 15, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Text:** Luke 24:35-48
Occasion: Easter 3, Year B **Themes:** Christ’s presence, peace, hope, comfort, resurrection

A little boy’s father gave him a dollar as he headed off to church. “Here,” said the father as he put the money in the boy’s hand. “Give this to God this morning.” When the boy came home, the father asked him if he had given the money to God. “No,” answered the child, “God wasn’t there this morning.”

There are times when we, too, may wonder about the presence of God. We may hit a patch of trouble. We may pray and it feels like no one is there. We may find a dark cloud hovering over us that seems impenetrable and we wonder what happened to God. Life may be in a “melt down” and comfort hard to find. Where is God then?

Such must have been the feeling of Jesus’ friends as they walked down the road to Emmaus after Jesus’ death. They were heart-broken and in despair. Their dearest friend and leader had been killed. Perhaps they were walking away from Jerusalem to get away from the site of his death.

Although they didn’t know it, God was already preparing to minister to their needs. Remember, how as they walked along the road, they were joined by someone whom they did not recognize. Actually it was Christ himself, the risen Lord, but for some reason, they did not recognize him.

As they walked down the road together, Christ asked them what they had been talking about. They replied, something to the effect of “Don’t you know? Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn’t know what happened there?” “What things,” Christ asks curiously.

“Why, concerning Jesus of Nazareth,” they said. Then they went on

to tell of the crucifixion and how that shocking experience had sent their spirits reeling. “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel,” they said sadly. Clearly, they were not feeling the presence of God at that moment. They were stunned by grief, racked by hopelessness, in need of God’s strength and yet had no idea that Christ was in their midst even then.

Jesus continued walking and talking with them, but they still did not recognize him. Finally they reached the little village of Emmaus, the end of their trip. But they sensed that their traveling companion was going further. They would be parting company, and decided to do something kind.

Still not recognizing him, they offered him hospitality. “Stay with us,” they suggested, “it is getting toward evening, the day is far spent.” And no doubt, suggested he eat and rest until dawn. Of course, Jesus stayed.

A little later, as they shared the evening meal, Jesus took a loaf of bread and broke it. Somehow, it seemed so familiar to them. Something about his mannerism, something about the blessing he offered, something about the way he handed them a portion of the loaf, all seemed to remind them of Jesus. Thus, as Luke tells us, “He was known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

Apparently, after the meal, Jesus vanished from their midst. And the two disciples, Cleopas and his friend, were filled with joy and quickly returned to Jerusalem to tell the other friends of Jesus what had happened. Can you imagine what happened as they told their story?

The amazing story, of their encounter with Christ, came tumbling out of their smiling mouths. Their eyes sparkled and danced as they related how they had discovered that their traveling companion was the risen Christ, and how he revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread.

And then Luke reports: “Jesus himself stood among them.”

Think of that! Jesus stood among all of his friends who were huddled and hiding, so close to where he had been crucified. Some ancient manuscripts record that Jesus then said, “Peace to you!” “Peace to you!” That would be like Jesus, would it not?

That was often the way with our Lord. At the Last Supper, St. John reports Jesus saying, “My peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (14:27) In the midst of His friends, Jesus often offered peace.

Yes, Jesus is the one who calms our fears, heals our shattered nerves, strengthens our inner selves, and prepares us for whatever comes. James Stewart writes: “Jesus can vitalize the most depressed and disillusioned person into a resurrected personality and a conquering soul.”

That is what Christ does for his friends. He can do it for the worst “basket case” among us. The resurrected Christ can bring resurrection to each of us. Christ is always a companion to his friends. It is unfailingly true. Jesus himself tells us, “I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you.” (John 14:18) And that’s a fact.

So, as the two disciples who had walked the Emmaus road told their story, “Jesus himself stood among them.” Now, Christ was in Jerusalem in the midst of his friends again. His friends were frightened, but he offered them peace. Christ did not come to condemn. Christ came to save, to restore, to embolden and to offer himself as companion and friend.

To that little group gathered in Jerusalem, meshed together in fear and trembling, our Lord asked, “Why are you troubled, why do questions rise in your hearts?” Of course he knew the answer to his own questions. Even Jesus had known the agony of a troubled spirit – in the garden, on the cross. Jesus understands our spirits when we get overwhelmed.

But he also knew that the surrendered life, the faith-filled life, has its rewards. Talking to his friends after his resurrection, Jesus assured them they could handle anything that confronted them. Anything! And, dear friends, so can we.

The story is told of a soldier who was on a ship during World War II and that ship was torpedoed. The soldier jumped into the water only to find himself swimming in burning oil. He knew his only hope was to try to swim clear of the danger. He prayed and he swam.

And soon the great verses of Roman 8 came to his mind. He tried to remember the words as he swam. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” He took a stroke. “Shall tribulation?” stroke. “Or distress?” stroke. “Or nakedness?” stroke. “Or peril?” stroke. “Or sword?” stroke.

Little by little, he made stroke after stroke, finally saying, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. And nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

After a while, he was in the clear sea. He floated on his back until he was picked up by a lifeboat. Later, he said that he could not have made it without the hope of Christ’s presence offered to him by those words he had learned in childhood.

Well, we can be sure that Christ wants us to know that His presence is always offered to us as well. He will never leave us or forsake us: In good times or in bad, in delight or in sorrow, in victory or in trouble, in sickness and in health.

Christ, this very day, stands with us and will do so until the end of time. Amen.