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A PRESENCE LIKE NO OTHER Michael B. Beough
John 20:19-23 March 30, 2008
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Why Jesus? Why not Buddha or Mohammed or Nothing? Why am I a Christ-follower, a disciple of Jesus? Why do I want others to know him and to serve him?

In one way or another, I have been asking myself these questions all my life. And I have seriously considered answers suggested by others. For example, I am a Christian because I happened to be born in the Bible belt to parents who indoctrinated me at an early age. I couldn't help but become a Christian. Or this. I am so psychologically and emotionally weak that I need a crutch to lean on or some cosmic genie to blame. Or this. I am so intellectually deficient that I am susceptible to fantasy and religious superstition for answering the riddles of life.

As I conclude this sermon series, I want to say that these answers suggested by others still push my doubt button. What if they are right? Would I be better off if I dumped Jesus and religion altogether and started living my life according to my own lights and reason and desires? When I view the last 2000 years of history and the role that religion has played in cruel schemes against humanity, I am sometimes tempted to yield to my doubts.

So, why Jesus? Why do I stick with him? Here is the short answer: *Because He is unlike anyone else who has ever lived.* And if he is who the Bible says he is, then I would be foolish to ignore him. But how can I ignore him when he is a Presence like no other?

I can't ignore his presence back then 2000 years ago.

Someone named Jesus lived about 2000 years ago. Almost no one disputes that any more. He was an extraordinary man. Almost no one disputes that either. Even if you took away all the reported miracles and denied his resurrection, he would still be seen as a man of unusual wisdom and power. For example, like no other in his time, he lived outside the box of the accepted religious and social values. He taught that God is a God of love, not hatred or anger. He said we should think of God as "Abba," which means Daddy. He elevated women and treated them with respect. He stood up for the poor. He welcomed children. He forgave sinners, even those who nailed him to a cross. He challenged the authorities. He lived an humble life. He taught as someone who knew what he was talking about.

All of these things caught the attention of people who were tired of being trampled on by religious and secular authorities alike. They flocked to

him to hear his teaching, and they brought the sick and lame to him because in his presence people found wholeness.

In fact, one of the most disturbing things Jesus ever said is in Matthew 25. He spins a parable of the last judgment. The king sitting on the throne of heaven welcomes some inside and sends others away. The difference? Those who took in strangers, helped the poor, fed the hungry, visited the prisoner, ministered to the sick were welcomed in. Why? Because in as much as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it unto me. It is like Jesus saying I am all around you. If you want to see me, look at the people who are at the bottom of the pile. That is where I can be found.

He also caught the attention of the authorities. Especially when he claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life, and when he said things like, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father in heaven. Was he a megalomaniac as the authorities assumed?

However you answer that question, you must admit that he was a presence like no other. Wherever he went, he commanded attention and left in his wake lives either awakened to the love of God or infuriated by his claims. He was impossible to ignore.

I can't ignore his presence back then and his affect on people. **Nor can I ignore how he has been present in people's lives since that time.**

Jesus said some remarkable things that have proven true. For example, in the 14th chapter of John, as he prepares his disciples for his death on a cross, he promises his disciples that he will be with them forever. More specifically, he says he will send a replacement for himself. He will send the Holy Spirit and it will be like having Jesus present inside you. "The Holy Spirit . . . will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you."

In Matthew 28:20, the resurrected Jesus speaks to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee. He sends them to go make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them everything Jesus had commanded. Then he finishes with these words, the very last words in Matthew, "And remember," he says, maybe seeing doubt or fear in their eyes, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Now unless I am ready to call a lot of people liars or crazies or ignorant fools, I have to listen to those who claim to have experienced the presence of Jesus in their lives.

--For some, it has been a mystical experience. A vision of Jesus. Like St. Catherine, a patron saint of Italy. Born in Siena, Italy, in 1347, where I will be visiting next week, she began having visions of Jesus at an early age.

She devoted her life to Jesus and took up his work of helping the poor and giving counsel to others. In her most famous vision, she became the bride of Christ in what is called a "mystical marriage". She married him. She then turned to public life in 1366. She began writing letters to princes and popes, encouraging all alike to pursue peace and to remember the poor. With her charismatic counsel, she managed to stop civil wars and even convinced Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon to return to Rome to reform the church. Call her vision crazy if you want to, but St. Catherine became a major player for peace and an advocate for the poor.

--For some of us, the presence of Jesus has been felt in a moment of intense spiritual awakening. As we have come to hear his call and claim on our lives, we have responded and our lives have taken a new direction. For example, I was caught by surprise several years ago as I was doing my early morning prayer walk at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. I was enjoying the morning as I contemplated on some things on my heart. Suddenly, in the middle of the dirt road, a sensation of the presence of Jesus overtook me. Not that I saw him. But I stopped walking and just stood there with tears streaming down my face. This was weird for someone like me who is not a crier. It was like Jesus grabbed my heart, and opened my eyes to see some things he wanted me to see.

--For some of us, his presence has been felt in times of great sorrow and distress. He has given comfort and encouragement to our broken spirits. I have counseled many people in times of grief who have reported that it was the presence of Jesus that got them through the tough times.

--For some of us, his presence has become real to us through meditation. It is a spiritual exercise to imagine Jesus sitting with you or standing with you or walking with you. You imagine what he looks like, what he might say, what you do. It is a powerful opening of the self to the influence and presence of Jesus.

--But there is one more way I have experience the presence of Jesus. I have experienced him in the beautiful lives of many people who have been Jesus to me. There is just no 'splainin' some people except to recognize that Jesus lives in them, because they are more like Jesus than I could ever hope to be. They express those Jesus-like qualities and values that I can only hope for in myself.

And this brings me to John 20:19-23. In these verses I see the meaning of His presence.

Look at what happens here. On Easter evening, the disciples of Jesus are holding up in a locked house because they are in fear of those who crucified Jesus. Suddenly, the resurrected Jesus shows up in their midst, which shows us that Jesus is with us wherever we are, no matter where we have locked ourselves in.

Jesus does three things. He grants them his *peace*. He gives them a *purpose* by sending them to go tell others the good news of God's love. He gives them the Holy Spirit and *promises* that they will change lives by carrying the gift of God's forgiveness into the world.

Peace. Purpose. Promise. Where have we heard that before? This is our answer to the question, "What is it about our experience with Jesus Christ that others cannot live without?"

Let me say a word about verse 23. There is no simple explanation of it. It sounds like the disciples are given the authority to decide who is in and who is out, who is forgiven and who isn't. But based on what we know about Jesus, that cannot be the meaning. Disciples don't go around playing God with people's lives.

Technically, here is what these words probably mean. All disciples are given the ministry of forgiveness. As we proclaim and extend the forgiveness of God, we need to know that not everyone will accept God's forgiveness or respond positively. Merely by extending forgiveness and inviting response, we will cause people to show where they stand in relation to God. Some will accept God's forgiveness and worship Him. Others will continue in their sin.

Now, here is my take on it. I believe Jesus is telling us that forgiveness is our job. Disciples are sent to proclaim and practice the ministry of forgiveness just as Jesus did. But if we withhold forgiveness, we may deprive others of this life-affirming, life-giving, super-charged gift from God.

Now here's the clincher. Jesus has left it in our hands as his disciples to make his presence known through our ministry of forgiveness. We are Christ's presence in the world. The Church is the body of Christ. For whatever reason, God has made us, his church, though often broken and weak, the representative of Christ to the world. Where two or more are gathered in my name, Jesus said, there am I in the midst of them. With the gift and power of life like no other can give.

Like I said, he is a Presence like no other. He is present with each of us right now. Let us bow our heads and spend a minute or two in his presence. You might want to do this. Imagine you are walking along a path and you see someone coming toward you. Somehow you know it is Jesus. As he walks toward you, what does he look like? Is his face sad or happy? Is there anyone with him? How do you feel as he comes closer? Does he say anything to you? What do you say to him? What do you do?