

# WHERE IS HE?

Easter Sunday Sermon, April 1, 2018

Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9, Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20; Colossians 3:1-4

Ever since Friday, everyone was convinced Jesus was gone, done away with, for good. The Roman authorities thought so; now they wouldn't have to worry now about any insurrection or revolt from the increasing number of followers of this so-called Messiah. The crowds who cried for Jesus' crucifixion thought so; in their minds this so-called Messiah didn't deliver on His promises of deliverance and he got what he deserved. They were now rid of him. The religious leaders thought so; they were convinced they had rid themselves of a credible threat to their authority and a blasphemer. On a grander scale, the Bible intimates the unseen powers of darkness thought so; they thought they had pulled off a grand triumph, for they believed they had frustrated the very plans and purposes of God. Everyone ... the Romans, the crowds, the priests, and all the powers of darkness ... all were convinced Jesus was gone, done away with, for good. Even His closest friends and followers and family were convinced it was the end of this one in whom they had put so much hope. Then early today, the women come to the tomb, and, as Matthew tells us, there is a violent earthquake, an angel comes down and moves the stone away from the entrance of the tomb (*a stone, by the way, which probably weighed more than the car you drove here this morning*), the battle-hardened Roman guards are literally paralyzed with fear, and then that angel sits on top of that huge rock and announces to the women, "*He is not here! He has risen!*" Personally, especially today, I can picture that angel grinning from ear to ear and adding, "*April Fool!*"

All of the elements of a classic April Fool's prank are on display here. First, a good prank always takes long and careful planning. Who would've guessed what God was up to? But this had been the divine plan for a loo-ong time, even centuries; in fact, many biblical scholars date this planning to at least the Garden of Eden! Second, in a good prank the surprise is complete and total. Well, put yourselves in the place of any of those present. Imagine their surprise, imagine their shock, imagine their fear, and especially for Jesus' friends, imagine their relief, imagine their amazement, imagine their joy! And imagine the consternation of Jesus' enemies, seen and unseen! Third, the more solemn the target, the more satisfaction the prank brings. What more solemn target than death itself? You know, when the Bible says, "*O Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?*" that is best understood as a divine *taunt!* God convincingly demonstrated His ultimate power over death. He is in control. The forces of darkness have done their worst, and God uses even that to affect what is arguably His greatest act! Fourth and finally, a good prank gives great satisfaction to the "perpetrator." And is God ever satisfied! And we certainly share a vested and joyful share in that immense divine satisfaction.

Now, don't get me wrong; I don't think of the death and resurrection of Jesus as some sort of joke. I don't make light of the fact the crucifixion was a terrible event. He paid an awful price for our salvation, and it was most difficult for those who loved Him to witness the full horror of His humiliation, torture and death. All their hopes and joys seem buried in His grave, all seemed lost, they were frightened for their lives, and now ... wow! So, the question that had to be uppermost on everyone's mind that morning is ... where IS He? Well, Matthew gives us four answers.

**First**, the angel tells us, "*He's not here! He has risen! Tell his disciples He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee!*" Now, Galilee is where most of the disciples lived; it's where they came from, where most of them were probably raised. It is approximately eighty miles from the site of this tomb outside Jerusalem. Galilee is their home. There's a sermon in itself here, but the angel wants to make sure all followers of Jesus get this straight: Jesus is alive! He really is! And He is waiting to meet you *right where you live*. In the ordinary places where you live your lives; go find Him there. He is waiting for you! If you want to discover the wonderful grace of forgiveness, if you want to discover real purpose for your life, if you want to find fulfillment, if you want to be a blessing to yourself AND a blessing to others who love you and depend on you, then GO FIND HIM! You can encounter the living Jesus Christ right where you live and work, and start adding your own chapters to this wonderful story!

We are told by Matthew they do find Him; Jesus arranges to meet all of them on a mountain, and there Jesus gives what has been labeled over the years as the Great Commission. He tells them, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given unto Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, to the very close of the age (or, as KJV has it, "at the end of the world.")*" So, where IS He? Jesus Himself gives His followers three more answers to this question.

**1) WHERE IS HE? HE IS AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD.** Jesus says, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.*" Our Epistle text tells us, "*Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*" We confess in the Apostles' Creed "... *He sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*" This is not so much a physical, geographical location as it is a somewhat allegorical location of **position**. The right hand of the throne of the monarch was known as the place where royal power was executed ("*all authority has been given to Me*"); it was the place for the prime minister. It is a place of authority, a position of rule; it is also the place of favor. If you were at the right hand of the throne, you had the greatest influence with the one who sat on the throne. Jesus Christ is at the right hand of the only throne that

counts, and all authority has been given unto Him, which He convincingly displayed by conquering death. Where is He? He is by the divine throne of the universe. So that means His words carry real weight! His words are trustworthy. His teaching is sound. His guidance is sure. He continues, *"Go therefore and make disciples ... teaching them to observe all I (the One who has all authority) have commanded you! And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world."* Which leads us to --

2.) **WHERE IS HE? "I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS."** Being typical individualist Americans, we hear Jesus say this and we think, *"He's with ... me. He walks with me, He talks with Me, and tells me I am His own while the roses are all dewy in the garden. When I walk along the Narragansett Bay shoreline, He is with me. Even if I go unto Connecticut, He is with me."* That's not what this means ... I mean, He will go with you into Connecticut, but that's not what He is primarily talking about. The "you" here in the Greek is a *plural*. Being from Rhode Island, we don't readily understand the concept of a plural "you," but if we were from Alabama or Georgia, we'd readily understand, *"I am with y'all!"* I think He is intimating, *"Because I'm risen, you will find Me in community. I am a living person you best get to know in a community that's engaged in making disciples and observing what I command!"*

Probably the best insight into this that I ever heard drew from a quote from C.S. Lewis in his book The Four Loves. Lewis was part of a group of three very close professional and personal friends: CS Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. These three writers were very, very close. When Charles Williams died, though all were saddened, Lewis wrote that the one small silver lining on that dark cloud is that he wouldn't have to (*in a sense*) "share" Ronald (Tolkien) with Charles anymore ... he thought with Charles gone, he would have more of Ronald. But this isn't what happened. He wrote: *"In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I need other lights than my own to show all his facets ... now that Charles is dead, far from having more of Ronald, having him to myself so to speak, I have less of Ronald ... I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a Charles joke, for example. So we possess each friend not less but more, as the number of those with whom we share him increases."*<sup>1</sup>

What Lewis discovered was he lost that part of Ronald that only Charles brought out. Instead of getting more of Ronald, he got less of Ronald, when Charles passed away. I think all of us understand this ... there are friends who bring out a part of us that no one else brings out! Most of you know I've been a widower nineteen years; those of you who did not know me when I was married to Ann never got to know those best parts of me that she drew out so well. My children may have had "more" of me as they grew up, but in a sense they had *less* of me; they never really got to see that dynamic, that married part of me which displayed somewhat-hidden facets of my personality that were only delightfully drawn out in my loving relationship with their mother. Another quick example: Steve and I were driving cross country two Augusts ago, and an old friend (*and best man in my wedding*) called on my cell phone out of the blue, and we proceeded to converse, laugh, joke and carry on for the next half hour or so. Steve was driving and occasionally looking over at me thinking, *"Who are you and what have you done with my dad?"* Again, my friendship with Rob (*that has endured more than 35 years despite the distance separating us; he is an ophthalmologist in Bethlehem, PA*) drew out parts of me my son had rarely, if ever, fully seen. And if that's true of human relationships, it is certainly true of divine ones. Lewis continues in that quote, *"For every soul, seeing Christ in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest."* Your Christian friends see parts of Jesus Christ you will never know or love unless you know and love and associate with them, because their experiences, their perspectives, their interactions with Him are all unique and personal and not the same as yours. Why? Because **He is risen!** He's real. He's a real person interacting with "y'all" who are part of His community striving to be His disciples. Sure, you can meet Him and encounter Him on your own, but you **best** get to know Jesus Christ in His interaction with "y'all." *"I am with you in the community of My people who are engaged in making disciples of all nations and trying to observe all I have commanded. That's where you're going to find Me as fully as you can this side of eternity!"*

So, where is Jesus? (1) He can be found where you live, (2) He is at the place of authority at the right hand of God, (3) He is in the community of His people engaged in discipleship, and one more ...

(4) **WHERE IS HE? HE IS AT THE END OF THE WORLD.** Jesus Christ is saying that when the world's history is over, *"I'll be there!"* In fact, what He is saying is, *"Because I am risen from the dead, I am the world's happy ending!"* What is the world's story? How's it going to end? Jesus says, *"I'll tell you how it is going to end. I'll be there. And because I'm risen, I will wipe away every tear ... I will make everything right. I will complete what I've started. The crosses of death and suffering will be swallowed up in resurrection. I stand at the end of the age. I am the world's happy ending."* There is so much more that could be said, but time won't allow; suffice it to say for now, the redemption of the world will one day be complete.<sup>2</sup> A verse I read at every funeral from the end of the Bible, John's divinely-given vision -- *"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new'"* Also he said, *"Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."* (Revelation 21: 4-5)

One more thing in closing, as I mentioned J.R.R. Tolkien earlier: At the end of The Lord of the Rings trilogy one of Tolkien's heroes, Sam, wakes up (*the movie version would have you think it was Frodo, but in the text of Return of the King, it's Samwise Gangee*), he sees Gandalf the wizard whom he had earlier seen fall to his death, and he says, *"Gandalf, I thought you were dead. But, then I thought I was dead. Is everything sad going to come untrue?"* (*emphasis added.*) And the answer of the risen Jesus Christ is **yes**. Everything sad is going to come untrue. Because He is Risen. (**"HE IS RISEN, INDEED!"**)

<sup>1</sup> The Four Loves, Chapter IV, "Friendship", p. 246, c. 1960. For an online reference, see <https://happywonderer.com/2007/05/16/the-four-loves-cs-lewis-quote>

<sup>2</sup> This concept is also included in the congregational responsive prayer following the sermon; copy attached.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

“The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked 'No Entrance' and left through a door marked 'No Exit.' ” -- *Peter Larson*

O God, grant to us to share in the life and the death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

LEAD US, WE PRAY, TO THE GRAVE THAT IS EMPTY, AND INTO THE GARDEN WHERE WE MAY MEET OUR RISEN LORD.

May we never again live as if our Lord were dead! Grant that through Him and with Him we may die to sin and live to righteousness.

GRANT THAT THROUGH HIM AND WITH HIM OUR OLD SELF MAY DIE, AND A NEW SELF, VICTORIOUS OVER SIN AND ABOUNDING IN GOODNESS, MAY BE CREATED ANEW.

Grant that through Him and with Him we may become a new creation in which the old things have passed away, and in which everything has become new.

SO GRANT THAT EVEN HERE AND NOW WE MAY DIE TO SIN AND BE REBORN TO RIGHTEOUSNESS.

And grant that we may be so one with our risen Lord that, when life ends for us in this world, we may know that death is the gateway to eternal life.

DELIVER US FROM THE FEAR OF DEATH; AND MAKE US TO KNOW THAT DEATH IS NOT THE END BUT THE BEGINNING, NOT THE TWILIGHT BUT THE DAWN, NOT THE MIDNIGHT BUT THE BREAKING DAY.

So grant us the certainty that beyond death there is a life where the broken things are mended, and the lost things found;

WHERE THERE IS REST FOR THE WEARY, AND JOY FOR THE SAD,

Where all we have hoped and willed of good shall exist;

WHERE THE GOOD DREAM WILL COME TRUE, AND THE HIGHEST IDEAL WILL BE REALIZED;

Where we shall be for ever with our Lord, Who taught us to pray,

"OUR FATHER ..." (*the Lord's Prayer, trespasses*)

Adapted from Dr. William Barclay's  
Prayers for the Christian Year, "Easter Even", c. 1964