

Holy Week 2023

Sermon Meditations

April 2-April 9



Jerusalem's Eastern (or Golden) Gate, site of the original Palm Sunday

WHAT KIND OF FOOL ARE YOU?

Sermon, April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday

The Son of David rode upon a donkey toward the city. Crowds of people followed along after him, shouting in celebration and joy, blowing horns and trumpets and flutes and pipes. As the son of David approached the gates of the city, the cacophony reached ear-splitting levels! In fact, the Bible records that the noise reached *ground-shaking* levels! The whole city was in an absolute uproar, with hundreds, perhaps thousands of people crying out their adulation of, and allegiance to, this Son of David. At the time the nation chafed under the despotic control of a despised authority, an authority many believed to be a usurper to the divine throne of this proud country with such a glorious heritage. The despised authority certainly heard the commotion, they could not help but hear the noises of loud celebration, and they grew uneasy and troubled by the adulation of the ever-increasing crowds for this man who were cheering louder and louder for this man now riding into town upon a donkey: *"Long Live the Son of David!"* To the deliriously exuberant crowds, this Son of David was the true king, he was THE anointed one, the one who would deliver the nation from the usurper and restore the great throne of David with authority and force.

The country: Israel. The city: Jerusalem. The year: 970 B.C. The Son of David: **Solomon**, the son of the great king David and the seventh wife of his harem, Bathsheba. The hated power, the usurper on the throne: Another son of David, Adonijah, son of Haggith, David's fourth wife, along all his cohort of usurping co-conspirators. And you thought I was talking about Jesus. April Fool, a day late!. The story can be found in I Kings 1 (*which wasn't one of our readings this morning, but I will summarize the highlights and you can either follow along in the pew Bibles OR take time later today to read the story on your own.*)

As I Kings opens, we are near the end of King David's life. He was old, frail, and could not even keep warm (*I don't endorse their solution for that last problem!*) One of David's sons, Adonijah, decides to take advantage of the situation, and he claims the throne of Israel for himself; he basically puts together and stages his own coronation (*the Bible names nineteen sons of David, there may have been more*). He recruits supporters from among the royal cabinet; some go with him, some don't. We read in verses 15-27 that Bathsheba (Solomon's mother) and Nathan (the faithful prophet) report to David that Adonijah is in the process of usurping the throne, the throne which had been promised to Solomon; they ask the king to correct the situation before it is too late. Verse 29, David reiterates his long-ago stated intention that Solomon will succeed him on the throne of Israel; verse 32, David directs: *"Set Solomon my son on my own donkey and take him down to [the] Gihon spring. There have Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him king over Israel. Blow the trumpet and shout, 'Long live King Solomon!' "* So, Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet and the loyal palace guards did just that; they went and placed Solomon on the royal donkey and escorted him to the site of the anointing as the rightful heir to the throne of David. After Solomon was anointed king, they sounded the trumpet, all the people shouted *"Long live King Solomon!"* and a noisy procession of flutes and pipes and horns and crowds of people followed as this Son of David rode the donkey toward the holy city. There was so much noise that we are told in verse 40 that the ground literally shook. The noise and hubbub got the attention of the usurper; when Adonijah and his cohorts learned what the hubbub was about, (verse 49) they scattered in panic. Adonijah himself, in fear for his life, went to the one place of sanctuary where he could be safe; he *"took hold of the horns of the altar."* in the tabernacle. As the chapter ends, we see King Solomon extending grace to Adonijah. Though he deserved death according to the custom and law of the time, Adonijah was spared ... provided he kept his end of the bargain and caused no more trouble. Solomon, son of David, is now firmly ensconced on the throne of Israel; he is Israel's rightful king. The usurper has been peacefully "dethroned."

One thousand years later, another Son of David rode upon a donkey toward the city. Crowds of people followed along after him, shouting in celebration and joy, casting their cloaks before him, waving palm branches as he passed by. As *this* Son of David approached the gates of the holy city, again the whole city was in an uproar ... hundreds, perhaps thousands of people cried out, *"Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna to the Son of David!"* More than likely these same cheers were heard a millennium earlier. (*On a somewhat related note, the late columnist/political commentator Charles Krauthammer once wrote; "Israel is the very embodiment of Jewish continuity: It is the only nation on earth that inhabits the same land, bears the same name, speaks the same language, and worships the same God that it did 3,000 years ago."*) Today we remember that day when King David's greatest Son, the Son of God, played out a role starkly similar to the account in 1 Kings, as He rides a donkey to His "anointing."

It was the time of Passover, and Jerusalem was literally bursting at the seams with crowds of the faithful, faithful Jews who knew their Scriptures, including the story of I Kings 1. The nation was again dealing with a despotic power; this time it was not Adonijah, it was Rome ... a power many believed to be a usurper to the divine throne of this glorious and proud country. Like Adonijah and his cohorts a thousand years earlier, those in power undoubtedly heard the commotion and noises of loud celebration, they undoubtedly grew uneasy and troubled by the adulation of the ever-increasing crowds for this man. The masses cheered louder and louder for this Son of David now riding into town upon a donkey. To the deliriously exuberant crowds, this Son of David, like Solomon before Him, was the true king of Israel, **He** was God's Anointed One, the Messiah; He was the one who would deliver the nation from the usurping Romans and restore the rightful throne of His father David. The people correctly understood that this Son of David was coming to restore a divine throne; what they did not fully understand is that this Son of David was coming to restore God's rightful place on the throne of His people's hearts. Solomon rode to the cup of his anointing at Gihon spring. Our Lord rode to the suffering cup of His anointing at Jerusalem ... both on the back of a donkey.

As I've said on more than a few Palm Sundays past, I believe there are three reasons Jesus rode a donkey into town. **THE FIRST REASON:** Every faithful Jew of Jesus' day knew this story of I Kings, and every faithful Jew knew Zechariah's prophecy referred to in our Responsive Reading. Zechariah foresaw Israel's Messiah, Israel's king, coming to Jerusalem, "... meek and riding on a donkey, riding upon the foal of a donkey." And here comes Jesus, riding on this foal of a donkey.. By deliberately choosing to ride this particular steed, Jesus unabashedly and boldly presented Himself to the people of Israel as the fulfillment of this very well-known prophecy. as if to say, *"I am the king about whom Zechariah prophesied, like Solomon before Me, I am the rightful heir to the throne of David, I am the Messiah, the Anointed One of God."* **THE SECOND REASON:** It was an ancient tradition that when an arriving king rode upon a donkey, it was a sign he came in peace. The *horse* was the mount of war; the *donkey* was the mount of peace. The horse puts the rider high and above the heads of others, the donkey does not. In fact, sitting on the short-legged beasts puts the rider in a vulnerable place, pretty much at eye level with a standing crowd. Mounted on the original "Low Rider," Jesus rode in the midst of the crowd, at eye level, being as much a part of the crush as all the others crowding that city during Passover. This King of Kings is also the Prince of Peace. He rode upon a donkey; He was not coming to do battle with the occupying Romans as the more zealous hoped. A thousand years earlier, David had Solomon ride on the mount of peace as well. Solomon mercifully and peacefully spared Adonijah, extending grace and mercy, rather than exacting justice. And Jesus is coming to town to ultimately do what it would take to mercifully and peacefully extend the grace and mercy of God.

The third reason Jesus chose this particular steed is one easily overlooked amid all the hosannas and hubbub. There is one key difference between Solomon's donkey and Jesus' donkey. Solomon's was from David's royal stable, and had been ridden before. The colt upon which Jesus rode was never ridden before; it had never before carried a human passenger. This is profound! In the midst of this excited, loud, exuberant crowd, this *unbroken* animal remains calm and compliant and cooperative with a passenger on his back. Those of you who know anything about such animals know the first time you get on an animal that has never been ridden, it doesn't just say, *"Oh, OK. Where do you want to go?"* No, the animal freaks out; it always does! It has to be first broken in. And this is not just any animal; this is a *donkey* ... an animal renowned for its dig-in-the-heels stubbornness and non-compliance. But the miracle on display here is that this particular donkey apparently *recognized* his Creator, the Ruler of all nature, submitted and allowed himself to be *"broken"* by Him, to be *tamed* by Him, to be *used* by Him, and remained calm amidst this exuberant, jostling crowd because he was under the guiding hand of the One Who calmed the sea. The donkey willingly subjected himself to his Lord, and obediently carried His Lord into his world. Perhaps Jesus' unspoken message here, *"Now look, everyone. If a simple DONKEY can understand Who I am and respond accordingly, well, how about you?"*

It's wonderfully appropriate that Palm Sunday is so close to April Fool's Day this year, for at the center of this drama is a creature that has long been depicted as the perennial symbol of foolishness. From earliest times, the hapless donkey has been depicted as contrary, unintelligent, a silly creature, an object of ridicule. Something of God's humor is on display here, for *this* particular donkey is the epitome of wisdom, not foolishness. I Corinthians 1:23 -- *"For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."* In commenting on this particular Bible verse, author Frederick Beuchner once wrote, *"There are two kinds of fools in the world: Damned fools, and what St. Paul calls 'fools for Christ's sake.'"*

What kind of fool are you? I encourage all of us to emulate this donkey and be a "fool" for Christ's sake, allowing Jesus Christ full rein and full *r-e-i-g-n* in our lives. May we allow Him to bridle our passions and harness our strengths, may we willingly submit to the gentle, guiding control of the King of Kings that we might be used by this greatest Son of David for His greater, gracious, saving purposes.

THE CUP NOT "PASSED OVER"

Maundy Thursday Meditation

April 6, 2023

Text: Matthew 26:36-46

From the worship bulletin for Maundy Thursday:

*INVITATION TO THE TABLE

(from the *Book of Common Worship*, c. 1993)

On this day, Christ gathered with His disciples in the upper room.

On this day, Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

On this day, Christ our God gave us this holy feast, that we who eat this bread and drink this cup may here proclaim His holy sacrifice and be partakers of His resurrection, and at the last day may reign with Him in heaven.

And on this day, Christ the Lamb of God gave Himself into the hands of those who would slay Him.

*CALL TO WORSHIP

(from Isaiah 53:4-6)

Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

BUT HE WAS PIERCED FOR OUR TRANSGRESSIONS, HE WAS CRUSHED FOR OUR INIQUITIES; THE PUNISHMENT THAT BROUGHT US PEACE WAS UPON HIM, AND BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;

AND THE LORD HAS LAID ON HIM THE INIQUITY OF US ALL.

As many of you know, the Garden of Gethsemane is on the Mount of Olives, a hill overlooking the old city of Jerusalem. Literally, the word "Gethsemene" means "an olive mill;" a gethsemene is a place where olives are pressed, crushed, put under unbearable pressure, to produce olive oil. I remind you of the line from the Call to Worship - "*He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities.*" Jesus prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane that a particular "cup" be removed from Him. This isn't the first time Jesus spoke of this cup. A few days earlier, the mother of two of the disciples, James and John, had asked for a special honor to be bestowed on her sons when Jesus would come into His kingdom. When she asked her question, Jesus looked at her and her boys and replied, "*You really don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?*" With all the naïve confidence of their youthful years, James and John replied, "*We can!*" Jesus replied, probably with a bit of a foreshadowing sigh, "*You shall indeed drink from My cup.*"

Now, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus chooses these same two disciples, James and John, along with Peter, to accompany Him. He had also brought these same disciples along to an earlier event we commemorated at the outset of the Lenten season, the Mount of Transfiguration. There they caught a glimpse of the glory to come; now Jesus brings them here ... perhaps to let them know that such glory can only come at a dreadful, but necessary, cost. Jesus tells them He is so overwhelmed, so full of foreboding and sorrow, that He was at the point of death. Three times Jesus prays that a "cup" be taken away from Him. Other Gospel accounts tell us He was in such great anguish that His sweat was like great drops of blood. What kind of cup is this?

In fifteen different Old Testament passages there are references to a particular cup, a terrible cup, a cup that contains the wine of God's wrath. Psalm 75:7 -- "*In the hand of the Lord is a cup, and the wine foams in it, hot with spices; He pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.*" All the major prophets refer to this cup full of the fiery, foaming of God's wrath and fury, a cup that is reserved for the wicked to "drink;" a cup the sinful must drain to the dregs.

Now there isn't a person here, myself included, who doesn't deserve to drink at least a portion of the wine of God's wrath. Jesus Christ was the one man who had ever lived on this earth on Whom that cup had no claim. He was sinless. There was no need for Him to taste the cup reserved for the sinful. The prophet Jeremiah, though, foretold a time when the innocent would taste the wine of God's wrath. And here is Jesus, the only innocent One in all human history, and He is about to drink the cup ... for God's wrath is about to be poured out on Him.

There is a sense in which the crucifixion was the most obscene event in human history. On this night Jesus knows that He is about to become an obscenity. Think of it ... when He will be on the cross on Friday, by the inscrutable design of God's grace, the God who loved this world so much that He sent His only begotten Son, the sin of the world will be *imputed* to Him. The obscenity of the murderer, the liar, the adulterer, the abuser, the thief, the embezzler, the cheat ... all these sins and more that violate the people of this world and grieve a holy God will be at one point focused on one man. He Who is the incarnation of God is about to become the incarnation of sin ... the absolute paradigm of obscenity. In and of Himself, Christ was pure, sinless, perfect, holy, majestic. However, once He embraces our sin on the cross, all of the ugliness and all the dirt and stain of human corruption will be focused, concentrated on His person.

Nineteenth century pastor and author, George MacDonald, wrote this: "*It is with the holiest of fear that we should approach the terrible fact of the sufferings of our Lord. Let no one think that those were less because He was more. The more delicate the nature, the more alive to all that is lovely and true, lawful and right, the more it feels the antagonism of pain ... the more dreadful is that breach of the harmony of things whose sound is torture. He felt more than man could feel, because He had a larger feeling.*" Let me repeat that last line: "*He felt more than man could feel, because He had a larger feeling.*" Like a musician who is especially sensitive to tonal discord, the sinless and pure Jesus must have been *acutely* sensitive to the harsh discord and ugliness of human sin. He Who knew no sin was about to become the Cup into which the filth and the weight of the world's sins would be poured. And He **dreaded** it, He **felt** it; that is part of the reason why we call these events the Passion. Three times He prays the cup may pass from Him. "*If there be any other way for salvation to be accomplished, let it be so. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt.*" But there was no other way. This cup would not be "passed over" (to make a rather poor pun on this first day of Passover for the sermon title). On Good Friday, God laid on Him the iniquity of us all. There is a nice touch by John in his Gospel; John tells us the *very last act* of Jesus Christ on the cross was to receive a drink of sour wine, a drink of vinegar, a drink of *wine gone bad*. It was lifted to Jesus' lips, and when He had received the drink, it was then that Jesus said, "*It is finished.*" The cup reserved for the wicked is now finished. It is drunk to the dregs by Christ.

On this night, just moments before going to Gethsemane to pray about that dread cup He faced, Jesus had met with His disciples in an upper room, and He offered to them there a new cup. "Take this cup from Me," He said. "Take and drink." The cup of the new covenant is now a cup of *blessing*. No longer is this the cup of God's wrath; this has become the cup of God's grace. No longer is it full of the wine of God's righteous judgment, but it is a cup full of the wine of Jesus blood, shed for the forgiveness and payment of our sin. On this night the cup of wrath has been *transformed* into a cup of blessing, filled with the blessing of God, the blessing and hope for glory gained through the broken body and shed blood of Christ.

There is one final place in Scripture where the cup of God's wrath makes its appearance, in Revelation 14:10. Revelation 14 makes clear that those who don't serve and honor God will one day taste the cup of God's fury; they will drink the cup of God's wrath. So, the Bible intimates that every human being is going to drink a cup, sooner or later; as Jesus said to James and John earlier, "*You shall indeed drink!*" The question is, which cup will it be for you? The cup of God's fury, or the cup of God's grace? We do have a choice. For all who repent of their sin, to all who seek to follow Jesus as Lord, as Host of this Table He now says to each one of us, "*Take this cup.*"

This cup that has been graciously transformed from the cup of wrath into the cup of blessing.

WEEP NOT FOR ME

Good Friday Meditation

April 7, 2023

It was to Martha, the sister of Lazarus, that Jesus said the words, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me shall never die, but have life everlasting"*. Jesus said those words just before He raised her brother Lazarus from the grave, the story from John 11 we talked about in worship on March 26. Just before He did that; we read in the Gospel of John that favorite memory verse of so many Sunday School students: "Jesus wept." Now, *why* did Jesus weep? Jesus was about to raise Lazarus, and He knew it. Wouldn't we rather expect Jesus to be almost suppressing a smile, knowing the joy He was about to cause these mourners? Jesus was about to bring this man back to life and all these people would not have to go on mourning! It's understandable that Martha and the other mourners would weep; they knew Lazarus, and they knew they would miss his face, the sound of his voice, his smile, his wit, his humor. They remembered the joys and sorrows and adventures they had shared, and would share no more. And they knew he was gone. That's what they knew.

Jesus knew Lazarus was gone, but Jesus also knew another reality, a reality He had seen first hand. He knew heaven. He had come from there. He knew it was real. He knew this place where there were no more tears, nor sickness, nor death. He knew, firsthand, a substantive joy and completeness that makes all our greatest earthly joys pale by comparison. He knew that reality, as only one who has been there could know it. And He knew Lazarus was there. And Jesus knew He was about to something rather harsh to His friend Lazarus, for He was about to call him back from that Place, compelling him to re-enter this physical world, back to physical life. Back to imperfection and incomplete joys and daily struggles. Back to live a time, and then to face death once more. Lazarus would eventually have to undergo the trauma, pain and distress of physical death a **second** time. The author of Hebrews tells us (9:27) *"It is appointed for man to die once, and then the judgment."* That's not a threat, it's a reassurance. No one should face death twice. And no one, having tasted the glory and perfection of heaven, should have to get "called back" to the imperfection and travail of this fallen world. I think it's enough to make a Savior weep! I could be wrong, but I think that's why we have that short verse: "Jesus wept."

As I've pointed out in some funeral homilies before, there are similarities between birth and death. Like the labor process of birth, death rarely comes without excruciating discomfort and pain and even sadness. Like the transition of birth, the transition of death is never, ever easy. In both birth and death, the pain seems almost unnatural, the process is always difficult, and the experience is always traumatic. However, as any of you who have borne children can attest, the anguish and trauma of the experience is made easier by the sure and wonderful expectation of life to follow. However, birth is still traumatic! Birth is always difficult...and death is always difficult. We undergo the trauma of entering this world through physical birth only once. Nobody has to endure the pain and trauma of their own birth more than once. And nobody has to endure the pain and trauma of their own **death** more than once...with very rare exceptions, God is merciful to us by appointing only one time to die, per person.

Would we have our loved ones back from the dead, if we could? Honestly, selfishly, for us ... maybe yes. But for them, could we ever wish to "call them back?" Again, I think Jesus weeps at the thought. They are in the real land of the living, the land of those fully alive, forever. They will not come back here to us, but through the grace of Jesus Christ we may go to join them one day. Let us honor their memory, let us celebrate their lives, and yes, we may and we should mourn their passing ... yes, mourn for ourselves, for we will miss them, but don't mourn for them. They really are at rest.

A few weeks after Lazarus was raised, we hear the sound of weeping again, but it is not from our Lord Jesus. Luke 23:27 -- *"A large number of people followed Him, including women who mourned and wailed for Him. Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, weep for yourselves and for your children.'" Although He is undergoing tremendous pain and agony of body, the sound of weeping on Good Friday does not come from our Lord. I believe that, like the expectant mother, the anguish and trauma of our Lord's "labor" was eased somewhat by His utter confidence in the life to follow. He knows where He is headed! He hears the tears of the mourners, and bids them, "Weep not for Me." And perhaps, with a prophet's eye, He foresees the suffering about to befall Jerusalem; indeed, in a few short years, Jerusalem will be ruthlessly leveled and destroyed. Perhaps Jesus may have been saying, "Don't weep for me, daughters of Jerusalem! In a few short hours I will be 'back home' in Paradise, and this present pain, anguish and suffering will be a dim memory. I know that, I'm confident of that. However, you must remain in this world of pain and sorrow, and terrible things are about to come upon you and your children. Weep for yourselves, but don't weep for me."*

When our dear relations and friends die in Christ, we have no reason to weep for those who are now residents of the real world, the eternal, everlasting, bright, joyful and substantial world of the Father. Yes, it is proper to weep for ourselves and our children, we who are left behind in a world that has more than its share of sin, sorrow, snares and sufferings. We can and should certainly weep as our loved ones endure the pain and suffering and trauma leading up to their departure. And after they have departed, we weep for ourselves because we miss our loved ones, but don't weep for them ... they have been born into a world of LIFE, brightness, beauty and wonder and they dwell in the presence of God. There is life, real life, beyond the shadow we call death. May that knowledge comfort and assure all of us as we deal with the inevitable anguish and trauma of physical death. Our Lord Jesus Christ emphatically affirms that death is **not** the final curtain, and the empty tomb is the exclamation mark of that affirmation.

WHERE IS HE?

Easter Sunday Sermon, April 9, 2023

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; to many in those crowds, 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 blasphemer and a credible threat to their authority. 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, 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, I've always pictured that angel grinning from ear to ear. This is not to make light of the fact that crucifixion was a terrible event. Jesus 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.

(1) **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 I would suggest 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 Gospel story!

We are told by Matthew when they do find Him, Jesus arranges to meet all of them on a mountain (*most likely Mt. Arbel, the highest point overlooking the Sea of Galilee, which is on the northwest coast overlooking the town of Magdala; our church touring group visited Magdala but did not go up Mt. Arbel. I climbed that little summit with Steve and Hannah in 2015*) 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 (I prefer the KJV, which says "unto the end of the world.")

So, where IS He? Jesus Himself just gave His followers three more answers to this question.

(2) **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 and rank**. 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 upon the throne. Jesus Christ is at the right hand of the only Throne that ultimately 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, among many other things, that 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 --

(3) **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 into 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 Yankee 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 by encountering Me with others in a community that's engaged in making disciples and making efforts to observe 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."*

What Lewis discovered was he lost and missed 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 something of this ... there are friends and loved ones who bring out a part of us no one else brings out! Most of you know I've been a widower almost 24 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-submerged facets of my personality that were so delightfully and only drawn out in my loving relationship with their mother. Another quick example: The summer of 2016 my son Steve and I were driving cross country, 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 kept 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 40 years despite the distance separating us; he retired a week ago Friday as 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 his/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 in community as the Body of Christ, 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." That was a big part of why the pandemic restrictions were so difficult, we missed worshipping Jesus Christ in community with each other ... so much of our interaction with the Body of Christ just can't be matched with an online and/or Zoom worship experience alone in the confines of our homes. *"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. A verse I read at every funeral (*and sadly, have read too many times this past week*) from the closing chapters of the Bible, John's divinely-given vision of the world coming at the end of this world -- *"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."* (Rev. 21: 4-5)

One more thought 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 the very much alive 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!")