

Christ Made Visible

Christ is Risen... He is risen indeed!

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...

Is it possible to imagine the Church without Christ?

Well, the novelist and short story-teller, Flannery O'Connor thought so... As a writer of so many engaging pieces, with great insight and subtle humor O'Connor loved to poke fun at life (and her Roman Catholic faith) using deceptively backward Southern characters and twists of irony to tell her stories... In fact, her writing style tried to communicate that all life – even the most awkward and grotesque that we would rather ignore - is infused with grace (and with truth)...

In one of her more well-known novels, that she titled, 'Wise Blood', she writes about a strange character named Hazel Motes, who declares himself to be "a preacher of the Church Without Christ."

In fact, in describing his purpose Hazel Motes says the following: "*I preach the Church Without Christ... I'm a member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see, the lame don't walk, and what's dead stays that way... Ask me about the church and I'll tell you that it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul - with redemption.*" ...

"The Church Without Christ."

That may strike us as both humorous and bizarre, just as Flannery O'Connor intended, but what she also wanted the reader to wonder about is whether or not it reflects the way that many of us – especially those of us who are called to be *the Church in the world* – experience life itself...

that in our day to day routines some of us – who call ourselves Children of God - don't share the Gospel as we should – some of us don't expect to see miracles in our midst – and some of us certainly don't spend enough time looking (for the Resurrected Christ) in the world today... thus becoming 'The Church without Christ'...

Now I'll let you decide what's true for yourself, but I share that with you because it seems to me – after looking at our reading this morning from

Luke's Gospel – that was how the first group of disciples were living their own lives after Jesus had been crucified on the cross...

wandering aimlessly, afraid of the future, uncertain of what to believe, and convinced that their Lord had left them... (and it's there that we meet that first group of disciples trying to be the 'Church Without Christ')...

In fact, when Jesus appears to them in our story from the 24th chapter of Luke's Gospel - the Bible tells us that (rather than being filled with faith in the promises of God) it tells us that they were 'startled and terrified' – full of doubts and worry – afraid and in hiding... and it tells us that they believed they were seeing a ghost (which was another way of saying that their eyes of faith could not perceive the presence of the Lord - in their troubles and their pain)...

And isn't that the struggle of everyone who tries to be the Church Without Christ?...

In fact, all we have to do is turn on the news and we can easily be bogged down with worry and doubts (rather than faith and hope)

– with a pandemic that never seems to go away, possible wars with countries like Russia, China, or Iran as a constant threat to peace, a racial divide in our country that threatens the stability of our democracy and causes ongoing pain for those who seek justice, with jobs and businesses being lost, and with so many people around the world who grieve the loss of loved ones –

is it any wonder why we, like those first group of disciples, struggle at times in seeing the presence of the Lord (in the world that we live in, as well?)...

But that's why Luke, the Gospel writer, tells us this story (about the disciples meeting the Resurrected Christ in their own fears and troubles)... so that we, too, might be led to live faithfully (in the promises of God) in the 'here and now'...

And notice in our story that when Jesus does appear, the first thing he says to them is, "peace be with you" – expressing not only concern for their well-being (but wanting them to rest assured – that like he promises for us – that our Lord is very near - especially in times of trouble...

And the Bible tells us on that day that he asks for something to eat – specifically a piece of broiled fish... now this has led many scholars to point out that Jesus wanted to prove to the disciples that he wasn't a ghost (but I think it was also done to remind the disciples of what it means to live as the Church in the world – and not by allowing themselves to be bogged down with worry and troubles – but by hosting others, and serving others, and sharing hospitality, and 'feeding his sheep' in our Lord's name, just as he calls us to do today – as the Church in the World...

And then, Jesus encourages them further - with his teaching, saying, "*everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and psalms must be fulfilled*" he says... and he then summarizes this teaching with the words, 'Repentance and Forgiveness'...

repentance allows us to turn away from what we have been (which is closed off to the things of God) – and it's through *forgiveness* that we discover who we might be *and who we might become* as the Church in the World (open and receptive to the Risen Christ)...

And then Jesus says to them (as he says to us), "*You are witnesses of these things*"...

And what do witnesses to the Resurrection do in this world?...

Well, they show the world (the love of Christ)... and together we show the world that Jesus is alive when we allow ourselves to be the Church in the World... the Church with Christ at the center...

So let me close with a story that goes back many years (but always left an impact in my mind and on my heart)... it was when I was living in Chicago and I kept hearing so many good things about a church called, 'Willow Creek Community Church' (which was about an hour and ½ from where I was studying)... and this was before we had GPS (and I remember printing out the MapQuest directions and heading out to find the church)...

But when I was about 2 miles *or so* from the church, I sort of got lost and decided to stop at a local gas station to get some directions... and when I walked in, I met a guy behind the counter who seemed a bit rough around the edges – wasn't quick to smile – and from quick glance seemed as if he had battled some of his own demons through the years...

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And so I said, *“I hate to bother you – but have you ever heard of a church called Willow Creek Community Church?”*...

And with that – the man’s eyes lit up – a smile ran across his face – and he said, *“Have I heard of it?... Sure, I’ve heard of it... that church saved my life”*... and he went on to say not only how much he loved the pastor of that church (but how it was the people who went to that church that made him feel welcomed and loved) as if Christ were the one doing it himself... and he said, *“My whole life changed because of that church”*...

We talked for a bit and I remember as I was leaving the gas station that evening – thinking to myself, *“I don’t know who this man spoke to at that church - but one thing’s clear – whoever these people are – Jesus is alive in their hearts.... And by the Grace of God – might he live in mine”*....

Friends, the Risen Christ is alive today – not in some far away place, or some holy site, or even in a church building...

But the Risen Christ lives in the heart of every believer - and in that way – He lives in us... each one of us... but the question is – are you willing to show the world?... are you willing to let Christ live in your heart?...

May the love of God be made known through you... may our Lord give you strength to do His will in this world... and may the Risen Christ fill your heart with the blessing of his peace...

In Jesus’ name we pray...

Amen...