

“ENDLESS EASTER”
Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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Two movies have been released recently which depict the effects of the disease we call dementia. In the first film, Anthony Hopkins won an Oscar for his portrayal of an elderly man battling his family to remain independent while battling dementia itself. That movie is entitled *The Father*. The second film stars Billy Crystal as an aging comedy writer who begins to experience signs of forgetfulness and disorientation. The title of that movie is *Here Today* – which is particularly poignant because it omits the second half of the saying that is so familiar to us: “here today, gone tomorrow.” This is what dementia does to an otherwise vibrant human being: it gradually erases one’s memory of the past, one’s awareness in the present, and one’s anticipation of the future. It’s like a person is “here today, gone tomorrow.”

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about that saying. It describes not only the trajectory of a disease like dementia, but also the transitoriness of all life. You and I are not static creatures who live forever. We change, we age, we die, we disappear; and the closer we get to the finish line, the more it seems like a 100-yard dash – over in an instant; “here today, gone tomorrow.” Along the way, the people around us also come and go. They appear for what seems like “one brief, shining moment,” and then vanish from our lives.

I’ve had the privilege and joy of being your pastor and friend for eight years, which is the longest I have ever served any church. Especially in Methodist circles, eight years is a lengthy tenure for a pastorate, and it’s been an extraordinary blessing for me to be with you for such an extended period. To paraphrase the lyrics from *My Fair Lady* sung by Professor Henry Higgins about Eliza Doolittle, “I was serenely independent and content before we met. Surely I could always be that way again, and yet, I’ve grown accustomed to your look, accustomed to your voice, accustomed to your face.”

However, as good Methodists, you and I are also accustomed to an itinerant system in which pastors are frequently transferred, and then later, mandated to retire. No matter how good the match is between a pastor and a church, all good things must come to an end. In retrospect, my eight years with you have gone by as quickly as eight hours. It feels like “here today, gone tomorrow.” What this creates for me is a sense of impending loss and absence, a feeling of anticipatory grief. Yes, God loves us with “a love that will not let us go,” but human beings are different; we eventually have to let go of those we love.

In today’s Scripture lessons, this is the reality the disciples are dealing with in their relationship with Jesus. He has been with them for only three years, but their lives have been forever transformed. He has been their companion, teacher, and mentor. He has shown them signs of God’s kingdom breaking into history and raised their hopes to a fever pitch. But then, in the space of only a few hours on Good Friday, he dies, and their kingdom hopes die with him. The life of Jesus ends when he is only in his early 30’s; the career of Jesus is cut short when it’s at its apex; the disciples’ experience of Jesus can be summed up in the haunting phrase, “here today, gone tomorrow.”

Then three days later, the unthinkable and the impossible happen. Jesus is raised from the dead by the power of God; and the miracle of his resurrection doesn't end on that glorious Sunday. Easter Day gets extended into an Easter Season. Jesus appears to his disciples over a period of forty days, sharing meals with them and instructing them just as he has done before. The disciples must think he is playing a game of "now you see me, now you don't." For whatever reason, he vanishes for periods of time, but the important thing is that he always comes back. Once again, the disciples become accustomed to his look, his voice, his face.

But then, on the fortieth day after Easter Sunday, he does the very thing they fear the most: he leaves them again, this time, apparently for good. Christ is transported to heaven, disappearing completely from their sight. The Easter season appears to be over and done with. The scenario is all too familiar to the disciples: Jesus is "here today, gone tomorrow." Who could blame them for feeling flummoxed?

The fact is that the entire New Testament is written against the backdrop of this vexing problem: the absence of Jesus. The one who is present for three years, then absent for three days, then present for forty days, is now absent again – and this absence seems to be more final and permanent. Of course, Jesus tries to prepare the disciples for his absence, both before he dies and after he is raised from the dead. It's not that Jesus doesn't tell them he is leaving; he tells them repeatedly. But still, they are caught by surprise; they feel abandoned, lost, "like sheep without a shepherd."

Make no mistake: this is the concern that lies behind many of our New Testament writings. How are the early Christians going to survive and thrive in a hostile world if Jesus isn't there in-person to sustain them? How will they remain connected to Jesus if he is no longer a physical presence in their lives?

At first glance, it seems that the disciples have only two ways to remain connected to Jesus. The first is through memory: they can look back and remember Jesus' charismatic, commanding personality; and they can remember his teaching, which is deemed to be so important that it is later preserved in sacred Scripture.

The other way they can remain connected to Jesus is through hope – the hope that the one who has come and gone will come again. In Luke's account of the ascension, two men dressed in white robes say to the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Here is something else that the disciples can hang onto: the hope that the one who is present, then absent, then present and absent a second time, will be present to them yet again.

This should all sound familiar to us, because these are the ways you and I typically try to connect to Jesus. We do it, first, by looking back into the past, by studying Jesus as a historical figure. We scour the pages of the New Testament; we read stories about his life and ministry; we ponder his words about God's nature, about himself, about what it means to be his disciple. If we're fortunate, we may even get a first-hand history lesson, visiting the places where his days in the flesh are lived out.

Several years ago, I made a month-long study trip to Israel, in part because I had never been there and thought my clergy education wouldn't be complete without visiting the land of the

Bible. But I also went for a more personal and spiritual reason: I wanted to see with my own eyes where Jesus was born, where he was baptized and tempted, where he called disciples by the Sea of Galilee, where he preached the Sermon on the Mount, where he was transfigured on another mountain, where he was betrayed and tried and executed and resurrected and then raised into heaven. I was not just a casual tourist; I was an earnest pilgrim. I was seeking to draw closer to Jesus by walking where he walked, hoping to get a glimpse of him in the Garden of Gethsemane or the Garden Tomb.

It didn't work. I discovered that there is no universal agreement about where any of these events took place. I also discovered that Jesus was nowhere to be seen as a flesh and blood figure, even in the Holy Land. As much as I wanted to encounter his presence, the man who lived on earth two thousand years ago remained mysteriously absent. I didn't feel any closer to Jesus in Israel than I did in the United States.

When you and I try to locate Jesus and relate to Jesus by sifting through the dust of another day, we may come to know some things about him, but we don't really come to know him. We acquire a lot of information, but little connection. The one who is "here today, gone tomorrow" is still gone.

But you and I have another alternative. When looking back into the past doesn't draw us closer to Christ, our usual pattern is to look forward to the future. Some glorious day, Christ will return to earth in final triumph and bring creation's story to a happy ending. Then, and only then, will his absence become a presence; only then will we be connected to Christ in a first-hand way.

It's no wonder that some Christians are more preoccupied with Christ's second coming than they are with his first coming. They pay little attention to his life and teaching, which offer guidance for living in this present world. They focus instead on the end of the world, on signs and timetables about Christ's future appearance and the world to come. You've heard me quote this line at least once a year over the past eight years: "Some people are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good." Today's Call to Worship offers us a healthier approach: "We look up in wonder as [Christ] is lifted from us into heaven! But this is not a time to gaze upward. There is work to be done. Jesus has entrusted the ministry of God's love to us."

The good news is that Christ is not just watching our ministry from a balcony in heaven; he is standing beside us and empowering us in our ministry here on earth. For those of us who seek a first-hand connection to Christ, there is a third alternative which we often overlook. We tend to cling to the past – remembering his incarnation; or yearn for the future – looking to his coming again and the consummation of history; and forget that he is with us now. Christ is not a deceased figure like Julius Caesar or Eleanor Roosevelt, whom we know only by studying history; nor is he a far-off figure like the next president or pope, whom we will know only they are revealed to us in the future. No, Christ is our contemporary – as alive and accessible as your talk therapist, your soccer coach, or your best friend.

You and I can draw some important implications from this fact. For starters, we have the assurance that Christ is present to guide us as we seek to discern God's will on difficult issues. How many times have we asked in a moment of ethical indecision, "What would Jesus do if he were here?" At a personal level we ask, what would Jesus do about my harsh employer, my dishonest neighbor, my irresponsible child, my inattentive spouse? At a societal level we ask,

what would Jesus do about same-sex relationships, about global warming, about racial injustice, about police brutality, about getting vaccinated for COVID – given the fact that he is silent on nearly all of these matters? In his three short years on earth, in a time and place far removed from our own, Jesus cannot and does not address every issue that perplexes us today.

But we need not wallow in ignorance or despair. Today is Ascension Sunday, and the whole point of Christ's ascension is simply this: that he who came to make his abode in one time and place is now released from these limitations in order that he might fill all times and places. In today's lesson from Ephesians, Paul describes Christ as "the head over all things" (1:22), which means that Christ is exalted in the heavens, looking down on us from on high. But in his next breath, Paul says that Christ "fills all in all" (v. 23), which indicates that Christ permeates the whole earth with his living presence. This is the wonder of it: after his ascension, Christ is nowhere in particular so he can be everywhere at once. He is not trapped in 1st Century Palestine or on the pages of holy writ; he is free to show up for us and speak his mind to us in 21st Century Connecticut.

And so, when you and I face an ethical dilemma, the question would be put more properly if we were to ask, "What does Jesus who is here wish to accomplish through me in this situation?" What is Jesus saying to me today about how I treat my neighbors, my enemies, or those who are simply different from me? We are still guided first and foremost by the witness of Scripture, by the words which Christ speaks in the first century. But Christ does not stop speaking when he leaves earth and ascends into heaven. In John's Gospel, Christ reminds us that he has yet many things to tell us (John 16:12), and he promises that his Spirit will guide us into all truth (v. 13).

To embrace Christ as our contemporary means that we have a living teacher and guide. It also means that we have an ever-present companion and friend – someone with whom we can connect in a personal way, who listens to us and responds to us, who empathizes and cares for us, who will never abandon us or leave us alone. All of this is possible because Christ ascends into heaven, that he might "fill all things." The one who is physically absent from us is spiritually present to us – in a way no other historical personage can be.

You may have surmised that I have a thing about getting to know great persons from the past, to get inside their minds and feel their energy in the present moment. I tried to do this on my trip to Israel, and I've attempted it a number of times here in America. For example, I've visited many of the sites associated with the life of Abraham Lincoln – his birthplace in Kentucky; his home and law office in Springfield, Illinois; the Executive Mansion in Washington where he presided over the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves. I've visited Ford's Theater in Washington, where Lincoln was felled by an assassin's bullet; the house across the street where he died a few hours later; his final resting place back in his hometown of Springfield; and most recently, the cemetery in Pennsylvania where he delivered the immortal words of his Gettysburg Address. I have also read several biographies and seen several movies about Lincoln which have brought all these events to life. But none of these things have brought Lincoln himself to life. I have no living relationship with Lincoln. All I have are records and memories of this great man, and perhaps the hope that I will meet him someday in the hereafter.

Friends, with Christ we have more than a memory and a hope, more than a past and future relationship. We have a living Lord who is here today and not gone tomorrow. We live with him in an endless Easter.