

WHY DO WE LOVE JESUS?

1 Peter 1:8-9

I thought about talking about something else today. I was strongly tempted to preach today on loving the earth. Next Saturday is Earth Day for 2023, and loving the earth is an important biblical concern, an important Christian concern, as well as an important survival concern. We believe the earth in all its fecundity [fruitfulness] and all its diversity is the creation/creature of our great God and the great gift of God to us. But that creature is hurting today, the earth is groaning and hurting today. The children of God are expected to care for and to love their fellow-creatures. So Earth Day is an important day for us, and learning what it means to love the earth - not to abuse or neglect it - is an important Christian concern.

But I have chosen to preach instead about loving Jesus, who not so incidentally loved the earth, especially the lilies and the sheep and the mountains and the valleys and the water and the bread. So — loving Jesus: am I using there wrong verb? We more often speak of believing in Jesus rather than loving him. Here are two things to note about that. First, when we say we believe in Jesus, we tend to mean we believe certain teachings/doctrines about Jesus — the incarnation, the resurrection, the humanity, the divinity, etc. But we do better if we think of believing as trusting, and so loving, Jesus, the way we trust and love a good friend. So be careful of that word “believe” because, here’s the second thing, “believe” didn’t originally mean only what we mean by it today, but it meant something more like “belove.” [The Germans would say *belieben*, and *lieben* means to love - *Ich liebe dich*, I love you.] Simply put, to believe in Jesus means something more than believing certain things about him. To believe in Jesus means to trust him — I like to say it means to trust that Jesus is the way and the truth about our lives. To believe in Jesus means to love Jesus — to receive his embrace of you and to hold on for dear life. So the question of this sermon is, Why do we love Jesus?

I begin with the story of a woman named Ann. Ann never knew her father. She feels a deep, deep longing for him, but even before she was born, her father became a prisoner of war. He went off to serve his country, and he never came back. So all Ann knows of her father she knows only from the pictures of him she can look at and the stories of him they tell her. She never saw him face to face, but she has heard how excited he was when he learned she was going to be born and what work he was doing that cost him his life. She has never seen her father...and yet she loves him. Even though she has never laid eyes on him, he is one of the most important people in her life. And you know where I’m going with this, don’t you?

St. Peter says something like that about Jesus in today’s second lesson. Some people knew Jesus face to face. Peter, in fact, was one of them. But now he writes to people living years later, including us. We were not privileged to be witnesses of Jesus’ life or death or resurrection, the way Thomas was...and Peter. We get all our information about Jesus second-, and even third-,

hand. We read St. John’s Gospel with its heart-breaking yet faith-inspiring stories of Jesus, and we read letters of St. Paul and St. Peter about what Jesus meant to them in the way of faith and hope and love and even in the way of their becoming missionaries and martyrs for his sake. And here is what St. Peter says to us:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Without having seen him, you love him: that’s what St. Peter says to his readers.

And that includes us. We have not seen Jesus with our eyes or heard his voice with our ears. Unlike Thomas, we have not been able to place our fingers on his hand-wounds or his side-wound. Our information about Jesus is strictly second- and third-hand. And equally amazing, it’s now nearly two thousand years old. We haven’t seen Jesus, and yet we love him! Why is that? How can that be?

I suggest three reasons. First, maybe it’s because of the difference for good he has made in the world. So much that is good in the world can be traced back to this humble carpenter who grew up in Nazareth and taught people about something he called the kingdom of God, which doesn’t mean the afterlife but this life and what it is like when God has God’s way with it, when God is king rather than Caesar. Historians trace much of Western civilization to Jesus. The first hospitals and orphanages and schools were all ways Christians developed to care for others in their needs. Christian social service organizations today do a major part of the relief effort to get food and medicine and clothing to where it is needed anywhere in the world. We see this today in the flood and hurricane disaster relief efforts and especially in the care of refugees, everlastingly, all around the world. Two thousand years later it is not an exaggeration to say that Jesus Christ is still for many the most revolutionary force for good in the world today. An unknown author has expressed it in words that may be familiar to many of you, called "A Solitary Life."

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn't go to college. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born.

He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness. [He had no credentials but himself.] He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away, and he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. While he

was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen (now nearly twenty) centuries have come and gone, and today he is for many the central figure of the human race and the leader of human progress. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of (people) on this earth as much as that one solitary life.

So we love Jesus, first, because of the difference for good he has made in the world. Perhaps we love him also because of the difference for good he has made in our own lives. How would your life be different without Jesus? For most of us that's a difficult question to answer, almost as difficult as asking how would your life be different if you had had different parents. One is tempted to say: Why, everything would be different – our sense of who we are and where we are and how we are and what we are doing here is so much shaped by our understanding of Jesus and by our relationship to Jesus. Charles Stork had a nice way of putting it:

I walk the dusty ways of life,
But ever my heart beats high.
And my song ascends to the crystal tower
That pierces the somber sky.
And though I have never seen my Lord,
Yet the pulse of my faith is strong.
It fills the world with loveliness,
And fills my heart with song.

Without having seen him, we love him because he makes the world a lovely place for us, and he puts a song in our hearts.

We love Jesus, finally, perhaps because no one has words of life and truth like his. We love him because he is the way, and the truth, about our life. If what Jesus teaches us and gives us as a way of faith and a way of life and a way of death and a way of hope is not true - about God being our mighty Father and this being God's world, God's kingdom, God's palace that we get to live in a short while, and even God having a place for us when we die - if all of that isn't true, then we are only orphans in a rather hostile world who have nothing really to look forward to but our diseases and our death and our decay. But now is Christ risen! That's what we say and we sing in this wonderful season of Easter!

Now is Christ risen, and now we love Jesus, and we believe in him, and we trust what he tells us about our life and our purpose, and we trust the import and the impact of his redeeming death. In his light life does make sense and have rich meaning. In his light there is reason to laugh and love and sing and hope and to make every moment count, even the last ones.

But here is a word of caution before we finish. Some-times it takes severe trials to reveal to us the power and the beauty of Jesus in our lives. There's an old German legend

about a baron who lived in a castle on the Rhine River and who stretched wires from tower to tower so that the winds might make them sound like an Aeolian harp. When the breezes were soft, there was no sound from the strings. But when a tempest arose and the winds beat against the castle, then the baron could hear the music of the strings even above the noise of the tempest. But it took a storm, you see, to produce the music. And so often our lives are like that! When life is peaceful and prosperous, it's so easy to take Jesus for granted. But when the storms beat against our life and the days grow hard, then we may best be able to discover what Jesus truly means to us and how far we may trust him and how much we may love him.

Ann looks longingly at a picture of the father she has never seen. Without him she would not be who she is, and without having ever seen him she loves him. We know how Ann feels. We have never seen Jesus, but we have heard about him. And we love him for the difference for good he has made in the world. We love him for the difference for good he has made in our lives. And we love him because he doesn't mislead us...he is the truth. He is the way and the truth about our life, and even about our death, and we love him for it.

So as B.C. said in his comic strip one year after he, like Thomas, had inspected the Easter evidence. . . Thomas, you remember, exclaimed My Lord and My God!, and B.C. in this comic strip walked out of the tomb after examining it, threw his arm up, and said Yes! The Yes of Easter! What a discovery!

Friends, is Jesus worthy of our trust, and is Jesus worthy of our love? Let's throw our arms up today, too, and join B.C. in saying: Oh, yes, he is! He surely is. Without having seen him, we trust him, and we love him!

Pastor Phil Schroeder
Easter 2 – 16 April 2023
Nativity Lutheran Church – Weeki Wachee, FL