

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, April 19, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"WHEN JESUS COMES AMONG US"

John 20: 19,26 "Jesus came and stood among them..."

Years ago, I heard someone describe the Christian life as Cross-shaped. The vertical beam of the Cross represents our personal connection with God through Jesus Christ. The horizontal beam represents our connection with other Christians, in the local church and in the wider Christian community, and indeed, with all the neighbours whom God brings our way. There is a vertical and a horizontal aspect to the Christian life. And we need both.

One of my concerns about present-day Christianity is that many Christians only emphasize the vertical dimension, their personal relationship with God and tend to neglect the horizontal aspect. Many Christians believe on their own, pray on their own, presumably worship on their own, study on their own, even serve on their own. I don't know how they do it but apparently they do. They feel no need for Christian community or the fellowship of other Christians. It is a reflection of our individualistic age, in which we can so easily become isolated from others. But the New Testament shows us that the Christian life is not supposed to be like this.

Have you ever noticed that generally speaking, the Risen Lord did not appear to isolated individuals, but to groups of followers. Yes, he appeared to Mary in the Garden alone, but most other times he appeared to groups of two or more followers. One time Jesus appeared to a gathering of 500 followers.

In John chapter 20, verse 19, we read, "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

A few years ago, Jay Leno of the Tonight Show was asked what he would like to have inscribed on his tombstone. Leno thought for a moment then answered with words he uses before every commercial break on his television show. "We'll be right back." Well, it won't happen for Jay Leno, but it did happen for Jesus. Jesus was right back, raised by God from the dead after 36 hours in the tomb, spread over Friday, Saturday and Sunday. And he was wasting no time in showing himself alive to his followers. From this particular appearance I want to

underline the words, "Jesus came and stood among them." This wasn't a resurrection appearance to an isolated follower, but to a number of followers as they met together.

And this is why we cannot be indifferent to the horizontal aspect of the Christian life. For it's in Christian fellowship that we often know and experience Christ's Risen power and presence. To be sure, Christ may come to us singly and some of us have had a profound personal experience of Christ. But generally, we experience the Risen One's power and presence in the company of other Christians. Jesus said it would happen, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

"Jesus came and stood among them..." When we gather together Jesus comes and stands among us, too. Now we will not see the Risen One in his resurrection body as the disciples did. But apart from that, what happened to the disciples on Resurrection night happens to us, both individually and as community, as Christ graciously comes and stands among us. And when it happens we can say, "Surely the Lord is Risen. He is Risen indeed."

First, when Jesus comes among us, he replaces fear with peace.

The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities who had put Jesus to death. Every shadow and every footstep filled them with terror.

But then the Lord came and stood among them and said "peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So often during his earthly ministry Jesus said to the disciples and to others, "Fear not," and here he was doing it again, replacing their fear with peace and joy.

Fear is one of our big enemies. The evil one works overtime to make us afraid. I think he often causes us to fear the things we shouldn't and not to fear the things we should. You know, the disciples probably shouldn't have been afraid of the authorities. After Jesus was crucified, the authorities probably thought, "Well, that's finished," and forgot all about Jesus' followers. So the disciples may have been needlessly fearful. But that's how the evil one works - he makes us afraid, whether we should be or not. He makes us afraid of the future, afraid of failure, afraid of life, afraid of death, afraid of others, afraid of ourselves, afraid of God. The Bible tells us that the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," but that doesn't we should be afraid of God. It means we should take God seriously, respect God and obey his word. Now we should be

afraid of the devil and his schemes but we often laugh at the devil and walk unwittingly into his trap. We are afraid of God but we are not afraid of the devil, and it should be the other way around.

Fear, real or imagined, can paralyse us, isolate us, restrict us. But as we gather here with our fears, the Risen One comes among us and says, "Peace be with you." He speaks to us and we know that we are held by the victorious Lord who has overcome our enemies, even the final enemy of death itself. We hear and trust the word that no power in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The Risen One replaces our fears with peace, a peace that spills over into courage and confidence and joy. And we go from this place with a new spring in our step. I hope and pray it happens for some of you today.

There is a lot of gloom and doom about the future of the church. But we don't have to fear for the church, because here people find something the world can't offer. One person wrote on the guest book in a certain church, "Thanks for the worship and thanks for the peace." And that's it. When fears start to overwhelm people, they are inevitably drawn to the house of God. For Christ comes among us here and replaces our fears with the peace we long for, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace the world neither understands nor gives. No where else can people find this blessing. That's why there will always be faithful churches which proclaim Jesus as Lord, because the Risen One comes to such gatherings.

Secondly, when the Risen Christ comes among us he replaces our weakness with divine strength. Verses 20-23, "Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you... when he had said this he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The disciples were afraid and motionless, huddled behind locked doors. But the Risen One came and stood among them and gave them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of power. Now the gift wasn't fully realized in them until Pentecost some 7 weeks later; however, Jesus was beginning to empower them to take the message of Christ crucified and Risen to the whole world. He was strengthening them to forgive one another and to proclaim the message of God's forgiveness. He was empowering them to form the church and to live as his followers.

So we too come here with our human weakness, our inability to get going and to do what God calls us to do. We come with our reluctance to forgive, to serve, to reach out in love, to form community. But when Christ comes among

us he replaces our weakness with divine strength. Christ comes to renew and to stir up God's Holy Spirit within us so that we can do things that we feel unable to do or are reluctant to do. The Holy Spirit gives us strength to say "no" to temptation and wrong, and to walk in the paths of goodness and mercy. We come here with the attitude of "There is much I can't do or don't want to do," but we leave with the song of Paul in our hearts, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." That is what so many of us receive in worship, an increase in strength, in motivation, in the power to do what God calls us to do. It may well be happening for some of you today. And it's all because the Risen One comes among us and replaces our human weakness with divine strength.

Finally, when Christ comes among us he replaces doubt with faith.

On Resurrection night the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Risen Lord, as he showed them his hands and side. Now Thomas was not with them that night and doubted their story. He wanted proof. But to his credit, Thomas stuck with the disciples, and they with him. A week later, when they met together in the same place, Thomas was among them, even with his doubts. But once again Jesus came and stood among them. He appeared to them all, but this appearance was specifically for Thomas. Jesus turned to him and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." And Thomas made the great confession of faith, "My Lord and my God." Christ came among them and replaced Thomas' doubts with faith.

When you have doubts and questions the place to be is not off by yourself, but here among believers, where the word of God and the word of faith is proclaimed and sung. For Christ comes among us here to replace our doubts with faith. Now of course, Christ can come to us singly and do this. It happened to C.S. Lewis that way. Lewis said that one morning as he went on a bus to the London zoo he was not a believer but by the time he came back home that night he believed that Jesus was the Son of God. You never know. But so often Christ comes and does his mighty work when we are together.

A young man told everyone he knew how much he disliked Billy Graham. His parents had made watch Billy Graham on television when he was young, and it had turned him off. He even took part in a demonstration outside one of the crusades. He thought Billy Graham's invitation to come forward and make a commitment to Christ was just a gimmick. He even attended a crusade so he could tell everyone what a fraud it all was. Yet something happened to him when he heard Graham's message in person. He felt as though Billy Graham was speaking directly to him. Then came the invitation, "Hundreds of you will be coming forward to receive Christ..." The young man quickly turned and left. But the next night he was back, and when the invitation was given he was among

those who went forward and accepted Christ. The young man ended up going to college and majoring in Bible. Today he works for the Billy Graham organization.

Perhaps nothing that dramatic has happened to us. Yet when people meet together, even when doubters come together with believers under the word of God, something happens. Christ comes among us and begins to replace doubts with faith. In fact, the Risen One has come among us today, and is working among us, replacing doubts with true faith so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.