

So, How Does He Be With Us?

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[0 : 00] Living God, we thank you that you enabled Matthew, the tax collector, and Luke, the physician, to write these two texts for us. And I pray in your mercy and grace that you would cause us to live in the reality the texts are describing as never before.

For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Jesus of Nazareth is risen.

Jesus of Nazareth is alive. And I shall never tire declaring that good news. The good news that came out of the cemetery in Jerusalem on the first Easter morning.

The flesh and blood man who touched and healed broken bodies, who touched and healed troubled minds, the man who gave himself to the excruciating death of crucifixion, that Jesus, that man, risen, alive, now and forevermore.

So, what does it all mean for life in this city? And in particular, what does it all mean for being and doing church in this city?

[1 : 25] We say of First Baptist Church Vancouver, we are a community following Jesus. What does that mean? Following. Following Jesus.

How do we do that in this city? What does it look like at this time in history? What does it mean to be a community following the risen and living Jesus?

Not many days after his resurrection, Jesus met 11 of the first disciples on a mountain somewhere in Galilee. On that mountain, the risen living Jesus makes a great claim, gives a great commission, and promises a great comfort.

And in so doing, he opens up for us the space in which he now calls us to follow him. A space shaped by a great claim, a great commission, and a great comfort.

The more I reflect on the claim, the commission, and the comfort, the more the word great gives way to the word huge.

[2 : 41] On the mountain after his resurrection, Jesus made a huge claim, gave a huge commission, and promised a huge comfort.

Since last Sunday, as I've been walking through the city, I've been feeling just how huge it all is, and how crazy it all is, if it is not true.

As I have ridden on the subway, and looked in the faces of people who come from nations all over the world, as I walked by Sears, and across Robson Square, and past Tim Hortons, and Sutton Place, and Wall Center, the word huge started giving way to the word gigantic.

On the mountain after his resurrection, Jesus makes a gigantic claim. He gives us a gigantic commission. He promises us a gigantic comfort.

He makes a hugely gigantic claim. He gives us a hugely gigantic commission. He promises us a hugely gigantic comfort.

[3 : 54] This morning, I invite you to focus on the great comfort. Look, he says, I am with you all the days, even to the end of the age.

A hugely gigantic, wonderful comfort. Before we look at the comfort, though, let us go back and review the great claim and the great commission, briefly.

The great claim. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. I don't know anyone in history who ever made such a claim. Oh, some people bordered on it, but everyone knew there was something off about those people.

They were megalomaniac narcissists, and everybody knew it. No one who ever met Jesus of Nazareth ever thought megalomaniac narcissist.

Everyone who spent time with Jesus of Nazareth thought, here's the real deal. Here's humanity at its very best.

[5 : 05] And he stands on the mountain after his resurrection and says, as a matter of fact, no hype, no fancy cameras or lights, just as a matter of fact, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

As we quoted last Sunday, my friend Dale Bruner, renders Jesus' words as, I am now the chief executive officer of the universe. Or, as one of the early Christian hymns sung in the church at Philippi puts it, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

It is the inherent implication of his resurrection. He who conquered death has now been given all authority everywhere. the great commission.

Go disciple all the nations. But of course, of course, go disciple all the nations into the reality of the great claim.

Go help nations enter into the full life-giving consequences of this great claim. baptizing them, baptizing them, says Jesus.

[6 : 18] Not just immersing them in water, but immersing them in the reality signified by the water. Immerse them into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Immerse them into the reality of God's new name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Help them enter into life with God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Holy moly! teaching them, says Jesus. Teaching them to observe all I have commanded you.

Eugene Peterson, in the message, renders Jesus' words this way. Go out and train everyone you meet far and near in this new way of life, instructing them in the practice of all I have commanded you.

All I have commanded. The one who has all authority everywhere has the right to command. Not only does he give helpful hints to live a more fulfilling life, not only does he raise possibilities for a better you, he tells us what to do.

He commands us. Teach the nations of the world, teach the city to do everything I have commanded you. Especially live and teach the two great commandments.

[7 : 34] You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And to live and teach Jesus new commandment. You are to love one another as I have loved you.

It's one thing to love as we love ourselves. Doing that alone would bring transformation to the city. But it's another thing to love as he loves.

Laying down our lives, giving ourselves away. Can you imagine what would happen in a city if the churches of the city actually did it? And then, the great comfort.

Look, I am with you all the days even until the end of the earth. The space in which he calls us to follow, the space in which we are coming to terms with this great claim and finding ways to obey the great commission is the space in which we are learning to live in this great comfort.

Look, he says. Behold. It's a command. It's the imperative form of the verb to see. It's one of Jesus' favorite commands. Look, look, I am with you always until the end of the age.

[8 : 49] The question is how? How is he with us? The answer takes us deep into the mystery of this space in which he calls us to follow.

The answer takes us through deep theological waters. Much greater minds than I have wrestled with this for centuries.

Given the state of being in which Jesus now exists, how is it possible for him to be with all of his disciples all the days?

How can he be with us all the time when in the nature of things it appears that he cannot be with all of us all of the time?

You see, Jesus of Nazareth is not only risen and alive, he is also ascended, ascended in his body with all of the limitations bodily existence implies.

[10 : 05] For 40 days after his resurrection, Jesus met with this first community of followers. Acts chapter 1 verse 3 to his disciples to his disciples, he also presented himself alive after his suffering by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of 40 days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

I wish I could have been there those 40 days. Every time I read this text I say, did anybody have a tape recorder there? For 40 days, Jesus kept on teaching his disciples and he began to prepare them for what was to come.

In particular, he began to prepare them for his departure, for his ascension. For 40 days, he met with this community of followers in his flesh and blood body.

In the flesh and blood body he had on Easter morning. But then at the end of the 40 days, he departs, he ascends from them in his flesh and blood body.

Acts 1.9 After he had said these things, he was lifted up while they were looking on and a cloud received him out of sight. Lifted up in his body.

[11 : 22] Acts 1.11 Why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus who was taken up into heaven will come in just the same way you watched him go into heaven. He's taken up in heaven in his body and he will come back from heaven just as he was taken up in his body.

The first community of followers rejoiced that Jesus was risen and is alive and then they rejoiced that he was ascended to heaven. Ephesians chapter 4 verses 9 to 10.

He who descended is he who ascended far above all the heavens or as another early Christian hymn says in 1st Timothy 3.16 He who was revealed in the flesh was vindicated by the spirit beheld by angels proclaimed among the nations believed on in the world taken up in glory taken up in his flesh with all of the limitations that implies.

It is the mystery in the great comfort Jesus of Nazareth has ascended into heaven in his flesh and blood body in his full humanity a human being now sits on the throne of the universe the human being the man yes he is the God man yes Jesus of Nazareth is still fully human and fully God the God man sits on the throne of the universe but the God man sits on the throne as man in a body with all of the limitations that implies how then can Jesus ascended in his body possibly be with all of his disciples everywhere in the universe what I'm trying to say is that the incarnation goes on the enfleshment of God goes on in the beginning was the word the word was with

God the word was God and the word became flesh and dwelt among us says John God became a human being but not just for 33 years God became a human being forever God the son became a human being forever that's how much God loves the world that's how much the creator loves creation God the father sent God the son to become one of us forever in the womb of the virgin Mary he became a fully enfleshed human and remains so forever again he has risen bodily not as some kind of phantom in some kind of ghostly like existence and he has ascended bodily not as some kind of phantom in some kind of ghostly existence he is ascended in his flesh and blood that he had on Easter morning

[14 : 38] I think that most people think that when he was lifted up when he was taken up he shed his flesh and blood I think most people think that when the cloud received him out of sight as Luke puts it Jesus somehow left the limitations of bodily existence and kind of morphed into a bodiless being so that he could be everywhere at all times but that's not the case when Jesus risen from the dead in his humanity ascended into heaven he ascended into heaven in his humanity he went into heaven he ascended to the throne in his humanity in the particularity of his humanity let me put it in a very startling way when

God the father now sees God the son he sees a human face which he had not before when God the father hears God the son he hears a human voice as theologian Garrett Dawson puts it what was never in heaven before human flesh is now there in the ascended Jesus dust is there our dust is there on the throne do you realize that he who descended from heaven to earth to become one of us ascended from earth to heaven as one of us in the virgin's womb he becomes what he was not for all eternity he becomes flesh and blood this is the grand miracle as C.S.

Lewis put it that he who made flesh and blood became flesh and blood and then for 33 years he lives our flesh and blood existence fully he lives as a true authentic human life as a true authentic human being indeed as the truest and most authentic human being he then dies our death he dies in our flesh and blood existence and he rises from the grave in our flesh and blood transformed yes healed and cleansed and recreated somehow he could move through doors but yet he kept eating fish and bread he risen in his flesh and blood and he ascended in his flesh and blood he who descended into flesh and bloodness ascended in flesh and blood with his flesh and blood with our skin on so to speak Jesus is Emmanuel God with us but he's Emmanuel God with us in the flesh he did not become a man just for 33 years he's still a man he will always be a man a man is now on the throne or as

N.T. Wright is putting it a human being is at the helm of the universe if we could see through that cloud if we could pull back the curtain for just a moment and see that throne where Jesus is we would see a glorious throne no doubt but we would see a man we can recognize sitting on that

throne not but a man with a body quoting Garrett Dawson again a human hand will grasp us as we make our way into heaven we shall be greeted by a human face the face of Jesus of Nazareth that has a form we recognize again the ascension does not dehumanize Jesus Jesus isn't like Clark Kent going to the telephone booth and take off his jacket and become something else he keeps the jacket on he became a man forever his flesh and bloodness says Carl Barth is not clothing which he does not put off it's a temple that he does not leave God the son became a man is still a man will always be a man with the limitations that implies so where is he and how can he be with us where is he I do not know it's the great unanswered question of Christian theology he is not dissipated into some disembodied existence he is still the man the disciples could touch and hold but where where is he because he is still human he cannot be everywhere yes he's the

[19 : 53] God man but even during the 33 years when he's the God man being the God man still meant that being man had limitations on where he could be Jesus could not be in two different places at the same time if he was in Nazareth he couldn't be in Jericho so where is he now as the glorified man and how can he thus be with us how London and then Moscow and New Delhi and Beijing all at the same time how can we in so many different places relate to him how can we in so many different locations have a personal relationship with him and how can he fulfill the promise of the great comfort for all disciples all the time in every place I am there with you how can you do that you can see then why followers were so longing for his second coming you can see then why the first

Christian groups always ended their worship service with Maranatha come Lord for they realized that we cannot know Jesus fully in his humanity until he comes back and takes us to where he is the more you realize that he has ascended in his humanity it awakens this passionate longing for him to come when we will see him face to face and where literally he will put his arms around us you can see also why the apostle Paul said what he did to the believers in the city of Colossi Colossians 3 verses 1 to 2 keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God set your mind on the things above that's not other worldliness it's just that Paul so longs to know Jesus Christ to the fullest extent and therefore he wants to be where Jesus and his humanity is so

I ask again how can Jesus be with all of us everywhere all the time as I read the New Testament before he comes again he is with us in five ways and the fifth one is the most important first he's with us in the body the church somehow we constitute his body in the world and somehow we encounter Jesus in one another a little girl says to her mommy I love Jesus but I want Jesus with skin on well that's the church we're to be to one another Jesus with skin on not that any of us is Jesus it's just that somehow the risen and ascended Jesus meets us in the humanity of one another that's why we need each other that's why we need to be in some kind of small group he somehow comes from wherever it is he now is and comes to us through one another's humanity second way the

Lord's supper somehow the ascended Jesus meets us at the table as we eat the bread and we drink the cups somehow he comes not that the bread becomes flesh not that the wine becomes his blood it's just that the physicality of the bread and the physicality of the wine remind us of the physicality of the ascended Lord's flesh and blood and somehow when we eat and drink together as his body he comes to us he comes to us from wherever it is he now is in the holy meal a third way in ministry as we serve the least the last the lost we somehow encounter the man at the helm of the universe you remember his famous parable about the sheep and the goats where Jesus tells us that as we serve the least last and the lost we serve him not that the least the last and the lost are Jesus not at all it's just that somehow the ascended

Jesus comes to us and somehow we touch him and he touches us as we minister to others this is why have to be engaged in some sort of ministry ministry is not an option for being a disciple of Jesus we cannot know him in his fullness we cannot connect with him as ascended lord unless we are involved in some kind of concrete service a fourth way the Bible he he meets us in the Bible not not that the Bible is a magical book not at all it's just that he has chosen to meet us in the pages of the book we cannot separate Jesus and his word when Jesus we only know him if he speaks and when he speaks somehow he comes somehow he is present as we open the book and speak somehow what is described in the book emerges from the pages not unlike a

[25 : 29] Richard scary pop-up book when you open the page the reality being described becomes three dimensional that's his promise to us he'll meet us here E.

Stanley Jones used to pray used to say I go to these words every day and I say to the words have you seen him whom my soul loves and the words take me by the hand and lead me beyond the words to him who is the word I cannot imagine being a disciple of Jesus apart from living in the word if the only thing we do at the beginning of the day is turn on the television or the computer or open the newspaper we are not going to realize the space in which we are living we need to Jesus in the midst of everything this is why we are now going to be developing as many opportunities for people to study the word as possible I dream of having something every day that helps people engage the living scriptures because he comes to us from wherever it is he now is through the pages of his book and then the fifth way the most important way the way that makes all the person of the holy spirit

I think this was his major theme those forty days after his resurrection before his ascension he sends his spirit to live with us he and God the father send God the holy spirit to live with us and the spirit bless his name somehow makes Jesus real to us that the spirit number one job make Jesus real to us as John Calvin emphasized the spirit is not a substitute for Jesus rather he is a link to Jesus because the spirit is not because the spirit is not flesh and blood the spirit is free to be everywhere at all times and therefore can make Jesus real everywhere at all times that is the great comfort that is the mystery of the space in which we follow

I like how Canadian theologian Douglas Farrell puts it the ascended Lord is not everywhere but he is everywhere accessible in his humanity the ascended Lord cannot be everywhere but because of the person of the Holy Spirit the ascended Lord is accessible everywhere and now you can see why the New Testament speaks so much about the Holy Spirit it is impossible to follow Jesus in the city apart from the Holy Spirit the whole Christian life is life in and with the Holy Spirit because the Spirit links us to the ascended Lord so that even in the ascended Lord's limited humanity he can be made real to us the space in which we now follow is filled with the Spirit not just the ashes from the volcano but with the

Spirit with a person not just a power not just an influence but with a person and learning to live in that great comfort is what following Jesus is all about