

Sermon for Sunday, May 23, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"IS JESUS AN ABSENTEE LANDLORD?"

St. Luke 24:44-53

Text: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them." St. Luke 24:50,51

The biggest event that ever happened in the world was the Christ-event. It was bigger than the world series or the Superbowl. It was a bigger event than World War II. Someone has written these words about him--let me share them with you: "More than nineteen hundred years ago there was a Man born contrary to the laws of life. This Man lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. He did not travel extensively. Only once did He cross the boundary of the country in which He lived; that was during His exile in childhood. He possessed neither wealth nor influence. His relatives were inconspicuous, and had neither training nor formal education. In infancy He startled a king; in childhood He puzzled doctors; in manhood He ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows as if pavements, and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for His service. He never wrote a book, and yet all the libraries of the country could not hold the books that have been written about Him. He never wrote a song, and yet He has furnished the theme for more songs than all the songwriters combined. He never founded a college, but all the schools put together cannot boast of having as many students. He never marshaled an army, nor drafted a soldier, nor fired a gun; and yet no leader ever had more volunteers who have, under His orders, made more rebels stack arms and surrender without a shot fired. He never practiced psychiatry, and yet he has healed more broken hearts than all the doctors far and near. Once each week the wheels of commerce cease their turning and multitudes wend their way to worshipping assemblies to pay homage and respect to Him." Yes, the Christ-event was a big event--the biggest in the history of the world.

It didn't seem like such a big event when it began back there in the stable. It didn't seem so big that day when he was executed like a common criminal. And it didn't seem so big that day on the hillside when he was with his disciples one moment and gone the next. But isn't history this way? At the moment an event may not seem so significant or important. It is only in retrospect that we see it so. Luther probably had no great sense of historic moment when he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Whittenberg chapel. Washington probably had no sense of great destiny when he marched his men out of Valley Forge. And Lincoln likely had little sense of historic moment when he scribbled some words on the back of an envelope that began, "Four score and seven years ago...."

So, when Jesus was parted from his disciples, they probably had no great feeling that this was a historic moment that would prove to be the turning point in the life of mankind. At the moment all they felt was a deep sense of personal loss. A friend was finally and forever gone. Someone whom they loved, admired, and respected was taken away from them. In the book of Acts, when this event is recorded, we are told that they stood gazing into the sky. There were emotionally immobilized by the terrible loss. They were not thinking about history or the future. Like anyone who has lost a loved one, they were simply paralyzed by the loss, by the grief, by the sudden sense of loneliness.

Yet, in retrospect, this had to happen. Jesus had already told them, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." I would like for us to direct our thinking along those lines this morning, that it is to our advantage not to have Jesus around. Notice in the first place then, that it was not a good thing for the

disciples to have Jesus on their hands. Imagine with me what it would have been like if Jesus had stayed on earth with his men. As long as he was around, would it have occurred to them to think of themselves as his spokesmen? Would they have gone to the end of the earth to tell other men about him or would they have expected men to come from the ends of the earth to hear him themselves? Would it have ever occurred to them to think of themselves as his hands to go everywhere in his name to do acts of kindness and mercy and compassion, ministering to others for his sake? Would it have occurred to them to think of themselves as his eyes to look out on a desperately needy world and see the needs of men and then give themselves to the world for those needs? No, it was really not a good thing for them to have Jesus on their hands.

Or think of it from another angle. As long as Jesus was around in his human, earthly form, he was so very limited. How many people could one man minister to? How many people could one man preach to and teach to? How many sick people could one man heal? How many towns could one man go to? How many people could one man sit down with and talk with about the Kingdom of God? Jesus had broken into human history as the Son of God, he had gone to the cross to die for the sins of the world, he had been raised from the dead as a proof and a testimony to us of our own resurrection, of our own life beyond the grave. This was the good news the world needed--the good news that God loved us, that God forgave us, that God has healing for our desperate needs, and that God has a place for us with him in heaven. But Jesus was a bottle-neck to that good news. As long as the disciples had Jesus on their hands that good news was limited to where Jesus was, it was limited to his personal ministry and there are limits to what one man can do.

So, Jesus said, "it is to your advantage that I go away..." He was right of course. The disciples didn't need Jesus on their hands--they needed him in their hearts. When that happened, there was not just one Jesus, He was multiplied a thousand-fold, a million-fold. When he came into the hearts of men they became Christ-like. People even began to call them Christ-ians. They went to the ends of the earth to tell men of him. They ministered to the needs of the world in his name. They told the good news everywhere. Yes, when they had Jesus in their hearts Jesus was no longer limited to the confines of the little nation of the Jews, he was no longer limited to one body, he was no longer limited to a handful of people. And because this was so, the Bible tells us that his disciples--with Jesus in their hearts--literally turned the world up-side-down. Yes, it was to the advantage of the disciples to get Jesus off their hands and into their hearts.

I would like to suggest this morning that the trouble with Christians today is that they have Jesus in the wrong places. For too many of us, Jesus is some figure of the past--some dim, distant figure of yesteryear, some ancient figure of times gone by. For some of us, Jesus is in heaven with God. That means, I suppose, that he is real for us but very removed. It means that he is not a part of this very real, very human world in which we live. And when you stop to think about it, I suppose that a heavenly Saviour is of little earthly good!

For some of us, Jesus is in our heads. He is an idea--an ideal. He is someone who was a very good man, a very fine teacher, a very excellent example. He is someone we want to imitate. He is an example to emulate. He is a model to copy. May I suggest this morning that having Jesus off in the past, in history, or having him removed from earth, off in heaven, or having Jesus as an idea, an example, in our heads, is just as bad for us today as it was for the disciples of Jesus to have Jesus on their hands?

Can you imagine going out into the world to tell somebody about a person who

lived in history "once upon a time?" Can you imagine going to somebody whose marriage is breaking up, or whose heart is broken, or who is desperately ill, or whose circumstances reflect poverty and need and saying to that person, "let me tell you about Jesus who is way off somewhere in heaven with God." Or again, can you imagine going to someone with terrible problems, who perhaps is the victim of some evil habit, or who is enslaved by some dreadful vice, and saying to that person, "let me tell you about this idea I have in my head about a perfect man that you ought to be like." And all the time that person knows more good examples than he can follow. He has more ideas about what he should be than he can be. A new example, a better example, only intensifies his guilt and his need. What he really needs is a new power in his life to help him be better.

Do you know what we need in the church today? We need to have our religion lowered about eighteen inches. We need to have our religion moved from our heads to our hearts. We don't so much need Jesus in history, we don't so much need Jesus in heaven, we don't so much need Jesus in our heads. Where we really need him is in our hearts. When we get Jesus in our hearts, we become Christ-like. When we get Jesus in our hearts he is multiplied a million-fold.

In our scripture this morning, we read how, as Jesus talked for the last time with his disciples, he was parted from them. Jesus got himself off their hands so that he could get himself in their hearts. Today, we have Jesus in history, or in heaven, or in our heads. Where he would really like to be is in the hearts of men. Where do you have Jesus this morning? Do you have him locked up in ancient history? Do you have him exiled from earth in some distant heaven? Do you have him trapped in your mind as a lovely idea? Is Jesus some absentee landlord? Only when he is in our hearts can Jesus begin to live his life through us.

Many of us this morning are disappointed in religion and in Jesus. Somehow we feel cheated. Somehow we feel there ought to be more to the Christian faith than we have experienced. Some of us think it is all about rules and regulations about how to act and what to be. Actually the Christian faith is all about surrendering your ego, the ruling center of your personality, to someone else--to Jesus. It is an act of the will, an act of the ego, that says to Jesus, "I will give my heart to you. I will let you live your life through me."

Let me confess to you this morning that I am something of a mystic who believes in a supernatural event. I know from my own experience and I know from seeing it happen to others that I am right. When you say to Jesus, "Lord, come into my heart. Take over the ego-center of my life. Rule and master my heart that you might live your life through mine."...when you say that and mean it, a supernatural thing happens. Jesus accepts that invitation. A mystical, supernatural event occurs in your life. The living presence of Jesus comes in power into your heart and things begin to happen. Changes occur and Jesus is no longer an absentee God. Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." In your life there is only one person who can decide to open the door.