

Jesus May Be Missing
Luke 2:41-52

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Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. Lk. 2:44-45

We are using Mary as our model in learning how to incorporate Jesus into our lives. The text for each of my sermons between Christmas and the beginning of Lent is a passage in which Mary and Jesus interact in some way. Here now is a text that yields a sobering realization: Jesus may not be with us as we assume he is.

The facts of the Bible case are these. Mary and Joseph have traveled to Jerusalem from their home in Nazareth for the annual celebration of Passover. It is a journey of just under 90 miles. Our story picks up after the festival is over and they are making their way north on the return trip to Nazareth. Mary and Joseph assume Jesus is traveling with them, but walking or riding with others of their troop. They travel for a day before realizing Jesus is not with them. They do not know where he is, and so head back to Jerusalem, frantically, to find him.

When we take a story like this as our starting point and pull it from the Bible into our day, we are hit with the sobering possibility that Jesus may be missing today even though we assume him to be present.

The thought is a staggering one.

The thought that Jesus may be missing is a staggering one, particularly given all the texts we love to rely upon and love to quote. During Advent and Christmas we thought and sung often of Jesus as Emmanuel, meaning God with us. That is a name given him in the Christmas story (Mt. 1:23). Later in his life, Jesus promised, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Mt. 18:20) Jesus also promised, "I am with you, to the end of the age." (Mt. 28:20) Tests and promises such as these make the idea that Jesus may be absent from us a staggering thought, indeed.

The possibility is a real one.

Staggering as it may seem that Jesus could be missing, the possibility of it is a real one. Mary tells us that. She turned around one day and Jesus was gone. That happened to her, and she was the epitome of faith at this point in the biblical story. She was the favored one of God. She had seen an angel. She heard from the shepherds who had heard and seen angels. She received the wise men. And within her own body she experienced the miracle of the growth and birth of the Christ Child. Still, she – even she! – turned around one day, and Jesus was not there.

It happened to Mary before she realized Jesus was gone. There was a day, you may remember, out on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water.

Peter asked if he could come out on the water, too. He did and he was doing fine until the moment he took his eyes off Jesus. As soon as he took his eyes off Jesus he started to sink, and he knew it; there was no mystery about it; there was nothing hidden from his understanding. (Mt. 14:30). Mary, on the other hand, took her eyes off Jesus, but she did not suspect anything. She did not realize Jesus was not with her. He was missing before either she or Joseph knew it.

I imagine Mary never heard the Apostle Paul say what he said to the Corinthians. He once said to them, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” (1 Cor. 10:12) I don’t think Mary ever heard Paul say that, but if she did, she would say to us, “Listen to that man! He knows what he is talking about! That thing happened to me.”

Some considerations to take into account.

Granting, now, that the fact that Jesus may be missing from our lives is a real possibility, we are brought to some considerations to take into account.

One consideration to take into account is that Jesus is not necessarily with business as usual. Business as usual for Mary and Joseph was to go up to the temple for Passover every year. Jesus is now twelve years old. Assuming they started going to the temple for Passover right after they were married, they had been making this trip for twelve years. They had a way of doing it. They probably stayed at the same inns every year along the way – they had been burned once not being able to find a motel room! They stopped at the same rest areas. They watched for the familiar landmarks. They knew the trip. It was routine.

In terms of today, business as usual for us includes the creeds, our traditions, our routines, our ceremonies, our hymns, our lectionary, and so forth. This is the way we do church. This is the way we do religion. It is safe. It is comfortable. It is known. But, in light of our text today, we have to take into consideration the possibility that Jesus may not be with our business as usual; he may not be with the way we have always done things before.

A second thought to take into consideration is that Jesus is not necessarily with the crowd. Our poll-saturated society needs to learn the limits of polling. Surveys, which capture the trends of the crowd, can grasp what it is that people like but they do not necessarily show what is true. I make my case for this point by way of a kindergarten class some years ago to which one of the pupils brought her pet rabbit for “Show-and-Tell.” One of her classmates asked if it was a boy rabbit or a girl rabbit. Before the owner had a chance to answer, one kid blurted out, “Let’s vote on it!” So! Polls can accurately show what is popular, but the fact is that what is true does not always follow what is popular. In some important situations, the right thing to do may be to go against the polls even if it means standing alone.

A third consideration to take into account recognizes Jesus is not necessarily with those traveling in our direction. Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was with their group, which, no doubt, was composed of fellow townspeople from Nazareth, kindred, and people who were like-minded – ones all headed in the same direction. But Jesus is not always with those moving in our direction. Evangelical Christians need to understand something is not necessarily true simply because it was spoken by an evangelical Christian. Liberals need to understand something is not necessarily defensible because it was said by a liberal. Likewise, both major political parties

need to know that something said by their side is not necessarily worthy and wonderful and true simply because it was said by someone from their same side. Truth does not necessarily travel with those going in our direction.

Where Jesus is found.

Having thought for a bit about where Jesus is not found – he’s not necessarily with our traditions, our trends, or our preferences – let’s use our text to explore where Jesus can be found.

Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple. They find him, that is to say, in the church. So if we think Jesus is missing from our lives and our perspectives, we can begin to look for him there, in the church, in prayer, in scripture reading, and in worship.

I do not want to draw too heavy an underscore under the idea that Jesus is found in the temple as if to say he is only found in the temple. Later on in the gospels Jesus – though he may not repudiate the temple – distances himself from it. He is found not in the temple but in the homes of outcasts and sinners and hanging around people of need. He is with “the least of these” (cf. Mt. 25).

Returning more directly to the text, Mary and Joseph find Jesus where he is engaged in spirited debate and discussion with the scholars and teachers of the temple. That tidbit leads me to suggest Jesus is not found today – necessarily – in settled answers but rather in unsettled and unsettling questions. He can be found in spirited debate and discussion, and so we should never be afraid of that.

And there is something else I notice in the text. I may be reading into it, but I find it suggestive nonetheless. Luke tells us Mary and Joseph found Jesus “after three days.” I hear “after three days” and think immediately of Easter, of the resurrection. Jesus was crucified on Friday and rose from the dead three days later. Mary and Joseph found Jesus after three days, and that spurs me to say we find him where he is alive. He is not a figure from the past. He is not an idea. He is not a character from an old book. He is a living person.

Well, as I said at the beginning, we are using Mary as our model for learning how to incorporate Jesus into our lives. This is a story in which Mary teaches us that incorporating Jesus into our lives is something that takes work. He doesn’t simply flow with our traditions, with current trends, or with our preferences. And that means we have to go about discerning where Jesus wants to be. When we find him there, it may happen for us as it happened for Mary. Our anxiety level will go down and we will have more to treasure in our hearts.