

# With Us the Whole Time

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
June 19, 2016—Vacation Bible School Sunday

- Psalm 73:23-26 Yet I always stay close to you, and you hold me by the hand. (v. 23)
- Ephesians 3:14-19 ...And I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. (v. 17a)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Whether we realize it or not, Jesus is always present to us in our lives.

“Surprise! Stories of Discovering Jesus” was the theme of this year’s Vacation Bible School. Children heard five Bible stories of some surprising encounters people had with Jesus.

The first story was one I like to call the “milk carton” story, because if they’d had milk cartons back then, twelve-year-old Jesus would have had his picture on one. Joseph and Mary were looking all over for their son who they happened to have misplaced during a visit to Jerusalem. It turned out that Jesus had made his way back to the Temple so he could shoot the breeze with the priests and religious scholars there. That’s where his parents finally caught up with him.

The second story was one I like to call “the backstage pass” because despite the apostles being overly protective of their master, Jesus caught wind of the fact that they were giving the stiff-arm to parents with little kids who wanted to meet the famous teacher and preacher. Jesus told his handlers to grant the kids full backstage access so he could do a meet-and-greet and give them some words of blessing.

On Wednesday came the story of the mega-potluck. A huge crowd had turned out for a teach-in, but there were no vendors where a guy could buy a hot dog or veggie wrap. The disciples found a boy whose backpack contained two dried fish and five loaves of bread. We’d like to think that the kid offered the food rather than imagine that the disciples just took it from him. At any rate, Jesus received the food with words of thanks to the boy and to God, and by the time the disciples had worked their way through the crowd distributing it, everyone had enough.

Thursday the story was about Nicodemus taking a risk. He was a loyal member of a prominent Jewish organization that had its suspicions about the authenticity of Jesus. But Nicodemus had seen and heard enough to believe that maybe, just maybe, this Jesus really was who he said he was: the son of God, the long-awaited savior promised to the Jewish people. So under the cloak of darkness Nicodemus came to meet with Jesus, who told “Nick” that believing in Jesus as God’s Son would require a whole new mindset, a “faith reboot” so earth-shaking that it would be like being born all over again.

Friday the children heard a story about two Jewish folk meeting Jesus while they walked the road to their home in Emmaus. This happened on the night of the very first Easter. Believe it or not, they didn’t notice that the stranger actually was Jesus. As they talked, Jesus helped them understand that the Empty Tomb was a good thing – it wasn’t the result of grave robbers; it showed God’s power over everything, including death! Arriving at their village, they invited the stranger in for dinner. They still didn’t recognize that he was Jesus. But then he offered the blessing before the meal – which included the act of tearing bread. That reminded the two of what the disciples said Jesus had done at that Last Supper in an Upper Room three nights earlier. Suddenly they recognized him – it was Jesus! And immediately he vanished from their sight.

Those stories have surprises in them, don't they? Those surprising stories teach us many things. The children learned that those stories teach us:

- that we can ask questions and grow in wisdom like Jesus in the Temple;
- that Jesus can bless us just as he blessed those little children;
- that we can be generous and share with others like the boy with fish and bread;
- that we can choose to seek out Jesus just like the Bible's own "Nick at night;"
- and finally, that we can recognize Jesus with us like the folks did after walking the road to Emmaus.

Jesus made a difference in all of those situations. So where in our lives is Jesus? How is Jesus with us?

The places we find Jesus in our lives might not be quite as surprising as in those stories we heard. Still, we know that because Jesus is with us, it makes all the difference.

- So for example, maybe you're feeling isolated somehow. You feel cut off, alone, maybe powerless. Jesus tells us he's with us in those situations. "I am the vine, and you are the branches,"<sup>1</sup> he said. We are connected to each other, and we all are connected to him.
- Or you're a parent or grandparent doing your best to raise children, but from time to time you feel like you've run out of answers, you don't know what to do, you lose your patience, or you're just worn out. Jesus is with us: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."<sup>2</sup> "I will be with you always,"<sup>3</sup> he promised.
- When the grief of loss tears you up and wrings you out, Jesus is with us. "Blessed are those who mourn," he affirmed, "for they will receive comfort."<sup>4</sup>
- When we are shocked and saddened and angered and fearful and confused and frustrated because an individual feels compelled to violently act out his or her hatred in an Orlando nightclub or on the Virginia Tech campus or in a Chattanooga Navy recruiting center or a Charleston Bible study or the Washington Navy Yard or an Aurora movie theater or a San Bernardino government building or a Newtown elementary school... when tragedies leave us speechless and seemingly hopeless, Jesus stands with us just as he stands with those grieving the victims, and just as he stands with comforting arms outstretched to welcome those who were viciously and callously struck down. Jesus stands in the chaos and darkness and pain, urging, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is with us. He's with us even when we don't realize it. If we're surprised to discover his presence in our lives, the surprise is because of us, not him—he's been with us the whole time. To illustrate what I mean, let me tell you a story about a third-grader named Jon Fancher.

When I was in elementary school my father was a pastor of a Church of the Brethren congregation in Rockford, Illinois. It was a small congregation meeting in a white wood-frame structure that used to be a chapel on a nearby Army base. The church owned a house for the minister's family to live in. The parsonage was next door to the church.

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:5

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:28

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:20

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:4

<sup>5</sup> John 13:34

After service one spring morning I consumed the allowable amount of Kool-Ade and cookies in the church basement. Leaving my parents and siblings at the church, I walked myself across the church lawn and through the gate in the picket fence enclosing our back yard. I went in our back door (who locked doors back then?). I made a necessary stop at a little room down the hall. I'd like to think that I washed my hands. I proceeded down the hall into the living room, looking down either at my shoes or checking my little clip-on tie or perhaps fidgeting with a stuck zipper. At any rate I was midway into our living room before I looked up... to see my grandparents from Virginia sitting there with big grins on their faces. They had decided to surprise my mom by driving from Virginia to Illinois unannounced! After we laughed and chatted for a while, I got to be "in" on the surprise, joining them to sit quietly as we awaited the arrival of the rest of the family.

Thinking back on that experience here's what dawned on me. Even before I realized it, my grandparents were present to me. They were present as I made my way across the lawn. They were present as I let myself in the back door. They were present as I went to... well, they were present even before I was surprised to discover them.

And the same is true of Jesus in our lives: whether we're surprised to discover him or not, Jesus is already present in each of our lives. Jesus is with us always,

- giving us guidance for choices we make,
- giving us inspiration as we choose paths to follow,
- giving us comfort against the pain and struggles that are a part of every life,
- giving us direction to serve God's plan,
- giving us hope enabling us to entrust our eternity to God.

Whether we're surprised like the folks in those Bible stories or not, we don't have to look for Jesus in our lives. Jesus is already here.