

“The With-ness of God”

Matthew 28:16-20

May 30, 2021

How do you end a gospel? Matthew gives this approach a try: earlier in this final chapter, Jesus Christ is risen after his brutal death. Seen by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, Jesus then instructed them to tell the others to go to Galilee where he would see them as well. There at that mountain in Galilee, where his ministry began, he passes the ministry on and says, before ascending, that he will be with them always.

Jesus’ physical body will soon step out of the frame, but he will remain. God will give the Holy Spirit. Jesus—though not there in the figure they had come to know—will be with his followers *all the time* until the end of history. Anticipating his physical absence, they are invited to cling to his promised presence. It’s an unclear departure that is really no departure at all.

Now, any loss that occurs without clear resolution, closure, or understanding, was named by Dr. Pauline Boss, as ambiguous loss.¹ Ambiguous loss includes deaths where the physical presence has left but the psychological presence endures—deaths without bodily remains or the loss of a relationship through a divorce or breakup. I’m thinking, this Memorial Day, of those who know the ambiguous loss of a loved one who does not return from war or returns as a shell of themselves. And ambiguous loss includes those situations where the physical presence remains but there is psychological absence, such as the grief that accompanies Alzheimer’s or addiction.

It strikes me that Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection—as first experienced by the disciples—is an example of ambiguous loss. Jesus’ bodily figure descends into the darkness of that tomb only to walk

out three days later. He then appears to them to promise he will be with them always, until the end of the age, only to ascend a little while later.

No wonder the disciples in this morning’s encounter worship and doubt at the same time. What are they to make of their ambiguous loss? They hadn’t yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit and they likely had their own visions of how their Savior’s story ought to go. Perhaps they still had friends who needed healing and thought the earthly Jesus was the only guy for the job. Perhaps, some wanted him to take hold of political power and set things right through governmental means. No matter what hopes of theirs died with Jesus on that day of crucifixion, their friend who was dead is now standing in front of them, telling them to go and that he’ll go with them, even as he prepares to ascend. What do they do with that? Where do they go from here?

Ambiguous loss can complexify grief. It can freeze our ability to grieve. It can lead us to disregard it or treat it as unimportant. But here’s the good news: meaning-making, fresh identity, and new hope are all tools that ease the impact of ambiguous loss. And all three of these things are found through life in the Spirit:

1. Meaning is made out of the peculiarity of resurrection as the disciples discover their friend’s physical absence has made a way for his Spirit to dwell with them forever.
2. Jesus gives them a fresh identity when he commissions them as the people through whom Christ lives and works, naming them “Apostles.”

3. And they are given a new hope: when, at Pentecost, the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ comes with delight, tenderness, and power—they begin living into the reality of the Great Commission.

Ambiguous loss is transformed into a mission and a new future. They learn to live with ambiguity by living into the unfolding narrative of the gospel. And it is through the Spirit that they—and that we—find meaningful purpose, fresh identity, and new hope.

Recently, one of you sent me and a few others an article that highlighted, for me, how savvy Jesus is when he gives us the Great Commission. The piece was by John Hagel III, published by the Harvard Business Review, so it spoke of best practices for corporations. But I think Hagel might have been taking a few notes from Scripture. He writes: “Narratives [...] are [...] open-ended. There’s some kind of threat or opportunity looming in the future, and it’s not at all clear how things are going to work out. The resolution of the narrative hinges on the choices and actions of those involved, which makes it a potentially powerful call to action.”ⁱⁱ

Now, Jesus knows how it’s going to work out. He is working all things out for good. I believe that. And still, he invites the disciples and all of us—in a moment of great ambiguity—to participate in this *unfolding* narrative to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that he commanded us. And to remember that he will be with us always until the end of the age. The great commission is an invitation to lean into the ambiguity by entering the narrative so that we might be transformed by discovering how the narrative unfolds with anticipation for how it will end.

How do you end a gospel this good? You don’t. If you’re Matthew, you allow Jesus’ invitation to have the last word. You let the Word made Flesh speak directly to the readers – you and me and everyone throughout history who worships him because the disciples did what he commanded. You let that

Word invite any person, whom he chooses, to hear and believe that they too are a part of the narrative because God is with them too.

Because “Narratives can play a powerful role in helping us to move beyond fear”ⁱⁱⁱ and face ambiguity. So when we are afraid that we are alone, Jesus says, “I am with you always.”

When we are afraid
that our belief is too thin
or our doubts too strong,
Jesus says, “I am with you always.”

When we are afraid
that our prayer life is too tepid
or our gifts too little,
Jesus says, “I am with you always.”

When we are afraid
that the tides of grief and loss are too great
from the last 443 days of global upheaval,
Jesus says, “I am with you always...
to the end of the age.”

It’s in hearing those words and recognizing that Jesus is speaking over the shoulders of the disciples to speak directly to you, that you begin to see this narrative is your narrative. Apostle is your name. This hope is our hope. And that history is still unfolding, still being worked out for our good and all of Creation’s flourishing...we can move beyond fear because God goes with us.

The invitation to enter into the narrative is an invitation into the heart of the Triune God.

An invitation to get caught up in the work, worship, and witness of our God.

An invitation to invite others to belong as part of the Body of Christ in the world.

Jesus’ physical figure may have departed, but the Spirit has descended and dwells among us. Look down at your body, over at your neighbor...the Body of Christ is here.

The Spirit of the living God is with us. There is nothing ambiguous about it.

We have a narrative to live into. We bear witness each and every day to the with-ness of God.

In Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*, Leo McGarry, the White House chief of staff, reaches out to his deputy, Josh Lyman, who is struggling. He shares with him this parable:

This guy's walking down the street when he falls down a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, "Hey, you! Can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription and throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts, "Father, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey, Joe, it's me! Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."^{iv}

That is the power and gift of the Body of Christ—the Church—when She lives into the unfolding narrative of the with-ness of God. When we are moved by the Spirit to live into this narrative, we—like Christ himself—throw ourselves down so others might ascend. We jump in pits with people. We enter into the ambiguity of life alongside another to say, "I've been here before and I know the way out." We do it because we too, like those first disciples, recognize that we have been raised to new life with Jesus Christ and that we have not been given a manual but a mission. Not been given a tidy resolution but invited into a narrative. Not been given advice but the Advocate: God's own Spirit.

The narrative of the Church goes on because Christ dwells in us through the Spirit.

And we cease to be the Church—
the Body of Christ in the world—
when we proclaim any other truth.

We cease to be the Church
when we claim that our good works
or our certainty
or our purity will save us.

We cease to be the Church
when we float above the earth,
refusing to enter into the fray
of human suffering, discord,
or injustice.

We cease to be the Church
when we do not invite all who feel so moved
to be baptized into the life, death,
and resurrection of Christ.

We cease to be the Church
when we do not pass these teachings on
because we think it is best to bite our tongue
and protect our pride.

We cease to be the Church
when we do not seek to live
in transformational community
with all nations, ethnicities,
and peoples who God calls.

For it is there...it is by living into the narrative of being the Body of Christ, empowered by the Spirit, that we will remember God is with us always until the end of the age. It's in doing the scary and transformational work of being a welcoming community of faith—bold in invitation and deep in belonging—that we see God with us. And, in doing that others will see that God is with them too.

We witness to God with us
by living into the story.
And in our witnessing to a watching world,
we are reformed and replenished
by the presence of God's own Spirit.

I know this because you have shown me.

In my time at Second, I have been privileged to journey alongside you in two of the most ambiguous years of our collective life. We have felt absence with

the possibility of presence waiting in the wings. We've lost things we cannot yet know that we have lost or mark the loss of. And we have been given gifts that we cannot yet distinguish.

Beginning in March of 2020, not knowing how the story would unfold, I watched you all faithfully live into the narrative and join God's mission for this moment. I witnessed you baptize, teach, obey, and share. You have been creative in living into Christ's commission and bold in following the Spirit. I've watched you teach and pray in pods, on screens, and outside. I've watched you mobilize to ensure school children have food and school supplies. I've watched you find new means of ritualizing grief together and remind one another that God is with us always, to the end of the age.

And I've heard you. In my time here, I have had several opportunities to take part in New Member Classes. Each time, I got to hear the reasons people felt called to join Second and how they have felt God with them here. They have felt God with them because of a friendly neighbor in the pew, or an important word spoken, or in the ways they have seen this church responding to suffering in our world with meaningful reflection, action, and compassion.

And in hearing these stories and seeing the great commission lived out, I have been renewed in my confidence that God is with us because the Spirit is guiding the Church. And Christ is constantly commissioning his disciples—you—for witness.

I believe your witness matters. That because of what you do here, people who are mired in the ambiguous loss of these last years will come to believe that God is with them. I believe your witness will help people find meaning, fresh identity, and new hope through life in Christ. And when you reach out your

hand to baptize someone in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or you tell someone that they belong here.... I believe you are making visible the presence of Christ.

I believe what you do here matters. That you bear witness to a God who is with us. Your witness is the with-ness of God. God's with-ness is your witness.

Thank you for being with me. Because you keep living out the narrative of the gospel, I believe God is with us too.

Don't let it stop with me. Go and tell the others.

How do you end a gospel? You don't. Amen.

ⁱ Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

ⁱⁱ John Hagel III, "Every Company Needs a Narrative," *Harvard Business Review*, May 25, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/05/every-company-needs-a-narrative>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hagel III.

^{iv} James K. A. Smith, "I'm a Philosopher. We Can't Think Our Way out of This Mess.," *The Christian Century*, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/i-m-philosopher-we-can-t-think-our-way-out-mess>.