

Is it possible to imagine Christianity without Christ?

The novelist, Flannery O'Connor thought so.

O'Connor loved to poke fun at life and culture using misleadingly backward Southern characters.

Her writing made the stout point that all life – even the most awkward and ludicrous – is infused with grace and with God.

In one of O'Connor's novels, entitled Wise Blood,

she writes about Hazel Motes, **"a preacher of the Church Without Christ."**

This is what Hazel says: "Well, I preach the Church Without Christ.

I'm a member and preacher to that church where

the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way.

"The Church Without Christ."

That may strike us as both humorous and bizarre, just as O'Connor intended.

But Hazel Motes' understanding of the gospel – where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way –

may not be so far from how we experience life.

Here we are two full weeks after Easter.

The Easter colors are here even though the flowers have had it.

The Easter themes continue with Easter hymns.

And our Scripture today continues to come from the day of resurrection.

Listen now to Luke 24 from last week.

Again, this is Easter day, and Jesus is walking along the Emmaus Road, talking to the disciples, but they do not recognize him.

Then they arrive at Emmaus, and they sit down at a table to eat.

Jesus takes bread, blesses it, gives it to them, then their eyes are opened and they recognize him.

But, it says, he vanished from their sight!

So the disciples went back to Jerusalem and told the others how they had encountered Jesus, that indeed, he had risen.

Then we get to verse 36:

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you

It appears that on that first Easter morning, and understandably so, the disciples were

trying to be the Church Without Christ.
They were wandering aimlessly.
They were not seeing very well,
not even recognizing their beloved Saviour in their midst.
Every time Jesus appears they don't recognize him at first.

Look at the numerous descriptions in this passage:

37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. and Jesus said to them, "**38 He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"**

Startled. Terrified. Frightened. Full of doubt.

The Greek words here imply much more vividly the state of the disciples –
sincerely troubled, emotional turmoil,
cognitive confusion, hearts full of conflict and despair.
I think you and I know a bit about this state.

Even though we are just two weeks removed from Easter,
we can quickly fall into feeling sincerely troubled,
into emotional turmoil, into cognitive confusion.
And before we realize it, we can find ourselves
in the Church Without Christ –
where the blind don't see and the lame
don't walk and what is dead stays that way.

When the challenges continue in your life, . . .
when the thoughts keep racing through your mind,
when all you can think about is – well –
the pain, the illness, the loss, . . .
and you cannot sleep, . . .
and you toss and turn for yet another night,
it is easy to wonder where Christ might be.
Sincerely troubled. Emotional turmoil. Cognitive confusion.
when every day we have increasing worries
about our world and war and chaos and climate.

See, we easily can find ourselves in a life without Christ –
where the blind don't see and the lame
don't walk and what's dead stays that way.
Then Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah shows up!
And Jesus, the Christ, ushers the disciples,
and ushers us, one more time,
from fear and doubt toward confident, perceptive faith,

AND from wandering confusion,
and emotional turmoil to living faithfully in the world.

Jesus, the Christ, shows up and speaks
with love and compassion, with a verbal offer of “Peace.”

39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

He seems genuinely concerned and empathetic
to the disciples' plight on that day,
Why do doubts arise? It is really me, . . . look at my hands, my feet.”
All of this intends to assure them that
the risen Jesus is the embodiment of life,
the person, the self, the identity
that they knew before his death.
He is no ghostly spirit.
“Touch me and see – a ghost does not have flesh and bones.”

41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”

And to make the point even more emphatically,
Jesus asks if they have anything to eat.

The verse says 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43and he took it and ate in their presence.

Now, the gospel of Luke is full of stories
of Jesus having meals with people.

He dines with women and outcasts.

He dines with tax collectors and sinners.

But this is the ONLY place where it says
Jesus actually eats something.

This is to make the point for real that
Jesus, the Christ, is truly in their midst.

And then Jesus, the Christ, encourages them further with his teaching

44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you— that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,

And the whole message, Jesus says, is

47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Way back at the beginning of Luke,

John the Baptist announces a ministry of **“repentance” and the “forgiveness of sins.”**

That this is what God is all about – the way of the kingdom.

This is what God has always been about –
all through the laws of Moses, and the prophets,
and the psalms – the way of God.

It is about turning from our ways – repentance –
and turning to God’s ways - forgiveness.

It is NOT about serving self, but serving God.

It is NOT about doing what we want in the world,
but doing what God wants.

It is about being released from as one another says
oppressions and depressions, and living in God’s love.

It is about freedom from sins, and living with love.

It is about all the things that Jesus did in his life:

Jesus welcomed everyone, he forgave sins,
he healed the sick, he helped the hurting.

He taught us to re-order our lives:

if we have two coats, give one away.

If someone has wronged us, forgive him or her.

If your neighbor is thirsty, give her a drink.

If your son is in a far-off land and separated,
welcome him home and have a party.

If you are a disciple, you love one another,
be kind to one another,

offer what you have to help one another.

These are all the things that Jesus teaches over and over.

“Repentance” – turning from what we have been or tend to be –

“and forgiveness” – lead us to new life in God’s realm.

And then on that Easter morning,

when the disciples realize he is risen,

and sometime later he is standing among them,

Jesus says, “this is to be proclaimed in his name to **all the nations.**”

There it is – the reminder that disciples are to carry on

Jesus’ same, loving, caring, healing, justice-seeking,

peace-building work in the world.

And Jesus says, **48 You are witnesses of these things.**

See, everything is to be moving toward
the promised and coming reign of God.

The promised reign of God looks like gracious acceptance –
not just for a few, or certain people, but everyone.

It looks like mercy and kindness.

It looks like gentleness and compassion.

It looks like peace and building peace near and far.

It looks like honesty and integrity.

How much does our world need that!?

It looks like light, not darkness.

It looks like life, not death.

It looks like community and caring,
not separation and alienation.

“You are witnesses,” Jesus says.

You are to live this way.

You are to embody this message with how you live.

God is always at work. God never leaves us.

God wins over illness and tragedy,
evil and despair, heartache and death.

You are to be witnesses. Live this way. Love this way.

God’s promised reign is surely coming. Live into it. Love wins.

That is the message from that Easter morning.

One very ordinary man not an author or a scholar
wrote this words that sum it all up so well

“Christian faith is focused upon a person.

*Jesus Christ is the central fact of history –
his life, his death, and his resurrection.*

His life appeals to everyone who has heard his story.

*Even if people don’t like what his followers have done with him
they cannot avoid the magnetic allure of his life. . . .*

But without the resurrection there would be no story.

The evidence for the resurrection is not just an empty tomb.

The real evidence is the women and men

who met the risen Christ and who witnessed

to his resurrection with their lives and with their deaths.

*It is the church which Christ created of those
who believed and who through the generations,
in tragedy and in triumph, became the household of God,
the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Spirit. . . .*

*None of the New Testament would have been
written, shared, read, or preserved apart from the resurrection.
Its writers were not interested in a Christ
who was alive and is now dead; they remembered,
thought of, loved and wrote of a Christ who was dead and is now alive.
They told his story not because of an interest in
biography, or history, or philosophy;
they were compelled by a conviction of a new reality:
Christ is alive, and, because he is, so are we.*

*These witnesses to the resurrection were absolutely
convinced that life is an exciting gift of relationship with him
and that death is no break in that bond.
That is very different from the popular attitude
that life is misery and that death, rather illogically, is an even greater disaster. . . .*

*We are given by God's grace the biggest news in the whole world.
For if Jesus rose again from the dead,
that is the most important thing that has ever happened."
("The Most Important Thing," J. Randolph Taylor)*

"You are witnesses of these things," says Jesus the risen Christ.
No matter where we are,
or what we are dealing with,
or our troubled world,
may we live with grace and conviction,
with integrity and justice, with worship and work that
WITNESSES to the God Who gives life and light,
Who raised Jesus from the dead,
Who rules and reigns forever, and Who will never let us go.
You are WITNESSES of these things. Alleluia. Amen.