

The Church Has Left the Building

Dr. Michael Helms

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It's Palm Sunday.

On Palm Sunday our children come down the aisle in the traditional service and wave palm branches, reminding us of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as the people sang Jesus' praises saying, "Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

One year, when I was the pastor at Trinity Baptist in Moultrie, we forgot to order our palm branches.

The Saturday night before the service, I lay awake thinking about the children not being able to process into the church.

Then I had an idea. I remembered seeing some Dwarf Palmetto bushes down by a creek where I had turkey hunted the year before. So I got up early on that chilly Palm Sunday morning, and I was in the woods by daylight. I walked down a long trail deep into the woods to the creek with my machete.

Unfortunately, I did not remember that most of the bushes I needed were growing on the other side of the creek. The people of my church never knew that for the children to continue waving palm branches that Sunday, I had to be baptized in that cold creek to chop down those Dwarf Palmetto branches.

I didn't fall in the creek before I came to church this morning. Still, I know that many of you would have joined me in going to some extraordinary measures if it would have allowed us to gather for worship today, especially as we begin Holy Week.

Our Livestream worship, Zoom Bible studies that are developing, our children's new Facebook page, and YouTube Bible Sunday school lessons are great substitutes. The church may not be gathering physically, but we have not stopped gathering, nor have we stopping worshipping or ministering to each other or others.

One of the great lessons we are learning amid the pandemic is Paul's word to Corinth: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Cor 12:27 NIV)

I am one of those who believe that the Church, with a capital C, can emerge stronger and not weaker as a result of the health crisis IF we remember that "we are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

Not all churches will emerge stronger. Some will emerge weaker. What will make the difference?

Here is a clue? How is it possible for the gospel to spread in countries where it is forbidden to gather freely to worship God? How is that possible?

During the Ebola crisis, the Liberian Baptist Theological Seminary closed, and Dr. Rick Wilson, the president at the time, had to leave Liberia and return home to the United States. To help starving Liberians, Dr. Wilson appealed to his friends to send money to purchase rice. The Bricks for Ricks Foundation sent \$1000. Dr. Wilson put Faliku Dukely in charge of distributing the rice, and his efforts kept hundreds of people alive.

Faliku studied at Mercer for one year. He returned to Liberia and graduated from college there. Later he was awarded a scholarship by the Liberian Government to study abroad in China.

I helped him with his expenses to get there, and I'm trying to help him get back home to Liberia.

He has been there for over three years. He is currently writing his graduate dissertation, but since the outbreak of COVID-19, he has been confined to his dorm room at Shanghai University.

Last week, Faliku joined our Livestream Service. After watching the service, he shared this:

“It has been almost a year since I listened to the word of God like this. I remember the last time I was on my way to church, along with a few others. We were asked by the university authorities to step down from the bus.

“On that very Sunday morning, we were told that it is forbidden to attend a religious activity of any kind in Shanghai and nationwide.

“Not only did they stop us, but also the police were contacted immediately and give instructions to close down the center. Since then, I have only been able to have bedtime/nighttime devotion. I have learned a lot in the process of knowing God for myself and being away from home.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, you are learning what persecuted people around the world have always known: The Church Has Left the Building. I hope you are learning the same thing that the Christians of China have learned and that the people of God were taught in the book of Acts.

The Spirit of God doesn't live in a building. The Spirit of God lives in the hearts of men and women, teenagers, and boys and girls.

We love gathering to worship, and we are commanded to do so. While you can take us out of the building, you cannot take the Spirit of God out of the people, and neither can you keep the message of God and the love of God from spreading from person to person, for the love of God is more infectious than any virus.

How is it possible for the gospel to spread in countries like China where you cannot find a Christian church building every few miles as we can here in the South? How is that possible?

It is possible because disciples of Jesus know that “We are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

Just last week, I was talking with a woman who told me that her husband prayed to accept Jesus into his life in their home. There was no preacher, no choir, no band. Just the two of them in their home.

This woman testified how much their family loves being a part of the body of Christ. They are growing in their faith through their worship and their relationships with others. Our church is important to them. Yet, just because we are away from the building didn't mean the Spirit of God stops moving.

Just because we cannot gather does not mean that we cannot witness.

Just because we cannot gather does not mean that the Church cannot grow.

Just because we cannot gather, does not mean that our responsibility to the body is any less.

Just because we cannot gather, does not mean that the Holy Spirit has stopped working.

Just because we cannot gather, it does not mean that ministry is not taking place.

Just because we cannot gather, it does not mean we cannot give of ourselves to the work God has called us to do.

Just because we cannot gather, it does not mean that our stewardship cannot continue.

Each day, God calls us to do something that might be a little different than the work that he invited us to do yesterday.

First Baptist Jefferson can emerge stronger and not weaker as a church IF we remember that “we are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.”

We are learning that the body of Christ is not a building.

A building is a gathering place. We often refer to the church as a building, but we know that the church is the people. The church is the body of believers.

During this epidemic, God seems to be saying to us, “Stop arguing about your gathering place. Focus on the body of Christ. The day that you agree on the vision I have placed before you, that is the day you will have more harmony about our gathering space.”

Church buildings that end up empty end up that way because the people cannot agree on their vision.

Unity comes in remembering that “we are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

What do we know about the body of Christ?

When you hear the phrase “body of Christ,” what do you picture?

Picture these two things: the physical body of Jesus and the gathered or scattered body of believers.

Let’s talk first about the physical body of Jesus.

Jesus, the Christ of God, came to us in the flesh. Jesus is God in the flesh. Jesus is God with skin on. By embodying himself in the flesh, God gave us a gift of entering our world and the limitations that come with it: our space, our pain, our problems, our insecurities, our need for prayer, our desires, our frustrations, our anger, our yet he did not sin.

This is God’s gift to us.

God came to identify with us in all of our struggles. He came to enter into our suffering with us.

Here is a profound theological question. Before Jesus gave us the gift of his body, could God empathize with us in our struggles and our weaknesses?

I ask that because Hebrews 4:15 says: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet he did not sin.”

So does that mean before Jesus, God was unable to empathize with us in our weaknesses? I don’t know.

I do know this. Jesus took away this lament: “God, you don’t understand how I feel. God, you don’t know what it is like to suffer. God, you’ve never walked this road. You’ve never journeyed this life. You’ve never experienced sorrow. You don’t know what it is like to be isolated.

You don’t know what it is like to be alone. You don’t know what it is like to be afraid. You don’t know what it is like to want to give up. You don’t know what it is like to be abandoned. You don’t know what it is like to fear death. You don’t know what it is like to have the weight of the world upon your shoulders.”

We cannot pray that prayer because Jesus gave us himself. Jesus gave us his body. Because of that, God understands.

Jesus went from being praised when he entered Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey to being betrayed by one of his own disciples a week later.

Jesus went from having people call out his name wherever he went to only hearing people call out the name of Barabbas when Pilate asked a crowd, “Which of these two do you want me to release to you?”

Jesus went from teaching about mercy and showing mercy to others to having no mercy taken upon him as the soldiers stripped him of his clothes and put a scarlet robe on him.

They placed a twisted crown of thorns on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him.

“Hail, king of the Jews!” They spit on him, struck him in the head again and again. They had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matt 27:28-31)

Jesus went from healing members of the community to having someone at the foot of the cross say, “He healed others, but he cannot heal himself.”

What can we learn from the body of Christ?

Before going to the cross, Jesus tries to communicate to his disciples something that we all need to remember about the body of Christ.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus was in the Upper Room with his disciples celebrating the Passover.

The scripture says that Jesus, “Took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body **given for you**; do this in remembrance of me.’”

His body was GIVEN for us.

When we think about the body of Christ, can we remember the word “unselfish”?

The body of Christ is a gift. He gave himself for us.

At the time, the disciples didn’t know or comprehend the significance of that meal. How could they? One of them left the meal to go and betray Jesus to the Romans.

Judas was thinking about himself. Jesus was thinking about the disciples.

Just a little while later, Jesus took the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus separated himself from the group to pray. He took Peter, James, and John with him to ask them to pray as well.

Jesus was thinking about giving his life for us, and all that such a decision entailed.

But his disciples were thinking about their own needs. When Jesus “returned to his disciples and found them sleeping, (he said), “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. (Matthew 26:40 NIV)

Just moments later, soldiers stormed the garden, and Peter drew his sword nearly killing the high priest, but instead, he cut off his ear. We might have done the same to protect ourselves or others we love.

But Jesus said, Put your sword back in its place. For all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Are you not aware that I can call on My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” Matthew 26:52-53

What is Jesus saying?

He is saying, “My body is a gift.”

He said it in a different way when he stood before Pontius Pilate, who said to Him, “Do You refuse to speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You and authority to crucify You?” Jesus answered, “You would have no authority over Me if it were not given to you from above.” John 19:11

Everywhere you turn in the gospels, you find it said a little differently but the message is the same, “Jesus’ body was a gift. It was a gift given to us. No one took it!”

One lesson we learn from the cross is the importance of dying to self.

The Apostle Paul says that those of us who belong to “Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Galatians 5:24

With all due respect to Paul, I would have to say that this is an ongoing process for me.

While I claim the gift of the grace of Jesus, I still battle the flesh, and I’m continually asking the Lord to crucify my fleshly desires.

We see that it was an ongoing process for Jesus’ disciples.

I’m sure that it’s an ongoing process for you.

We worship Jesus because he had mastered the experience. He was perfect.

This is the reason the Revelation lifts him up with these words:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.¹³ And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, blessing, and

honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. Rev. 5:12-13

What does it mean to be a part of the body of Christ for us, the Church, the body of believers?

As individuals, we each must decide to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus. That makes us a part of the body of Christ.

Being a part of the body of Christ is also about being a part of a body of believers. It is important to identify with a small group of believers that can walk with you in your faith and can help hold you accountable for your walk with the Savior. It's important to have a body of believers that you can share your journey of faith with because two or three strands are stronger together and just one strand alone.

There are benefits to belonging to a group of believers who love and care for each other, but when the roll is called up yonder, it will be about whether you denied self and followed Jesus.

It's about choosing to live an unselfish life.

Is your life about you, or have you decided to give your life away in service to Jesus?

Those who have decided to give their lives away in service to Jesus come together and form a body of believers called the church.

Some churches become unhealthy and unproductive because too many members forget that they are the body of Christ, and as the body, they are not here to live for themselves, but as the body, they are here to live for Jesus. That means we are to give ourselves away in service to the Savior.

Too many churches have forgotten that if the gospel is going to spread, the Church has to leave the building.

The last thing Jesus commanded us to do was to scatter and not to gather: "Go," he said, "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Well, it seems, by choices not of our own, all churches have been forced to leave the building.

When we move to the other side of this pandemic, will we be closer to Jesus or further away?

Will our church be healthier?

Will we realize that we ARE the body of Christ and that each one of us is a part of it?

Will our nation have learned anything about our arrogance?

Will we have repented of the gods we have created and worshipped, of our self-indulgent lifestyles, of the way we have left God out of our homes and daily lives with little thought to how we fit into the body of Christ and the calling we have as Christians?

During this Palm Sunday, I encourage you to look at the body of Christ given to you on the cross.

Right where you are this morning, I invite you to pray to receive Jesus in your life and commit to being his disciple.

Decide today, that with God's help, whether you are going to die to self and live for Jesus.

Confess your sins and invite Jesus into your life.

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