

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Today is my niece's 24th birthday. I would really like to be with her to celebrate, and to tell her that I love her and am proud of the young woman she is becoming. But she is going to graduate school in New Zealand, almost exactly on the other side of the world from here. I can send her an email, and I will, but they are just words on a screen. And besides, when I woke up this morning I realized that in her world the day was already over, and they were getting ready for the beginning of winter. She is just that far away. I keep a picture of her—and all of my family—both in my home and in my office, but that's nowhere near to being present on her birthday. Theoretically, I could have a Skype conversation with her in real time, but I don't know how to do that, and even that would only give me the *illusion* of our being together. The fact is, she is not here—not even close. And there is no substitute for that: Physical Presence.

It can be tempting, even for us believers, to think in the same way about Jesus after the Resurrection and Ascension. The almost automatic instinct is to think that he's just *gone*—far, far away gone. New Zealand gone. Sure, maybe he'll come back one day as he promised. And for now at least we have "Photographs & Memories" (to quote a Jim Croce song title!), but for now—and for the last 2,000 years or so—he is not physically present to us, and there's just no substitute for that.

And that kind of instinct, although it is understandable, is completely wrong and contrary to Easter faith. Our weekly gatherings here are not in celebration of a *memory* (although that's part of it). Here at our Eucharist we celebrate a *presence*, a real, physical encounter. and that encounter is not just with the consecrated bread and wine (although that's part of it, too). Nor is it just the encounter with the proclaimed Word of God in the Sacred Scripture (although that's part of it).

Jesus is present to us in the physical presence of the people in this room, in me, in the person sitting next to you, in this whole Christian community. And if that seems astonishing or impossible, that's why we need to keep saying it and remembering it and working ever more diligently to recognize and truly believe it. It's what he *told* us! Whenever Christians gather to celebrate Eucharist, no matter *where* that is and no matter *who* those people are, "There I am in the midst of them." I'm really *there*. It's not like my niece in New Zealand: Jesus is *here* in flesh and bones. If we struggle to quite believe it, the problem is with our vision, not with Jesus' alleged distance. Or maybe the problem is in our constant need to be better reflections of the Lord who already lives in us and among us. We can always do it with more charity. St. Peter said it in the Second Reading today: "*You, you* (meaning us) are being built into a Spiritual house, clean and precious to God, like living stones." Not someday. But now. Here. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation..." Not someday. Now. You believers are the very presence of the risen Lord—already.

It's hard to believe sometimes. We can look to be so ordinary, so imperfect, so weak—both to one another and to the world outside. But it's true. The first Apostles struggled with the very same thing. The gospel today remembers that, when St. Thomas says, "Lord, tell us where you are going," and St. Phillip says, "Lord, show us the face of God." And the answer to both of them is the same one: *I am where you are going. I am the face of God.* And I am not in New Zealand or in the next galaxy or in the far future. I am right here, right now, in *you* and you in me.

I used to tell my seminary students that if, at the end of trying to capture all of this, it feels like your head is going to explode at the mystery of it all, then you have begun to understand. How can he be so intimately *here*?

Jesus' parting words to Thomas were these: "I will come back and take you to myself, that where I am you also may be." That coming back doesn't mean only at the end of time or at the hour of our death. He came back at Pentecost, with the rushing in of the Holy Spirit upon the Church, and he has never left us since. He's here, in us, now and especially as we gather for the Eucharist.

But he is not only in and among *us*. He is physically present in and among every human person and community that strives honestly to recognize and welcome him. That means that his real presence is not limited to any single gender, culture, nation, or even religion. Our own Catholic Church teaches all that, as does Pope Francis. As a very practical way to reflect on this, I'd like to commend to your reading the insert in this weekend's parish bulletin on the reality of human trafficking. It's been prepared by our parish's Social Justice and Caring Committee, with my complete endorsement. Because faith compels us to recognize Jesus alive and present in *every* person, and even especially among the most vulnerable ones, this topic is not a matter that we are free to overlook—especially when it is ongoing in our own neighborhood. And it is.

To embrace the great news of Jesus alive and present here, now, is not only joy. It is responsibility. May we indulge both edges of that good news with enthusiasm.