Luke 2:41-52

“Finding the Jesus You Though You’d Lost”

Matthew B. Reeves

Mary and Joseph always knew where to find Jesus when he was young. He was in his crib taking a nap. He was with Joseph at a jobsite. He was stay with a neighbor while they were out for the afternoon. But now Jesus was 12. He had a phone and he was texting. He’d proven himself a pretty responsible kid. So Mary and Joseph felt good about giving him a longer leash. But they never imagined that when they left the Passover festival in Jerusalem for the day’s walk home back to Nazareth that Jesus wouldn’t have been somewhere in the group.

Luke gives us a holiday story on the order of the movie, Home Alone. A lot of us have seen it, right? A frenzied family flies to Paris for Christmas, and it isn’t until they’ve driven to the airport, gotten on the plane, and made it halfway over the Atlantic that they realize one of their children is missing. We ask, “How cold that ever happen?” Mary and Joseph hear us ask this and they look at their sandals, and they shrug and say, “Well, you know, sometimes things just happen.”

So it happened that Mary and Joseph left Jerusalem without their twelve-year-old son. Who was also God’s Son. When you lose the Son of God, that’s a bad parenting day. We might ask, how could you lose Jesus? Except maybe we don’t have to ask. Because, at some point, we seemed to have lost Jesus too.

No one who loves Jesus ever means to lose him. Still, it happens. You thought he was with you when you left home—for college, or for a job in another city—but in the new place, with new pressures, without your trying, Jesus got hard to find. You lost your job or your health or a spouse, and the Jesus you believed was with you seemed to have gone missing.

I’d guess that most of us know someone that used to be part of church but, at some point, left one congregation and didn’t arrive in another. They may tell you that they aren’t done with Jesus but they feel done with church, which could mean that some difficulty in finding Jesus at church was part of why they left.

When parents can’t find a child, they feel lost too. Disoriented. Panicked. Frantic. When we feel we’ve lost our bearings in life, we can feel that we can’t locate Jesus and the direction he’s leading us in.

Mary and Joseph went back to Jerusalem to search for their missing son high on the desperation scale. By their second day searching the city, when they still hadn’t found him, their desperation level must have been off the charts. Mary was coming absolutely undone.

For 48 hours, they searched every place in Jerusalem they thought Jesus might be. His favorite restaurant. The places they typically stayed when they were in town. They went to all of their acquaintances but no one had seen him. They walked through main streets, side streets, and a few back alleys where they shuddered to think of Jesus being in.

You know how it is when you look for something you’ve lost. You start with the likeliest places, and the longer you look the more unlikely are the places you check. No one looks for the car keys in the freezer on the first pass through the house. Luke says that’s how it was with Mary and Joseph. It wasn’t until they’d looked in all the places that made the most sense that they said, “Well, I can’t imagine he’d be there, but I guess we could look in the Temple.”

And there he was. There was Jesus sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. For Jesus part, he doesn’t get it. He doesn’t get why the Temple wouldn’t be the first place his parents would look.
His mother says, “Young man, what have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you.” Which sound like something we might say in our desperate moments. Jesus, why have you let this happen? Why did you let my child get into trouble? Why haven’t you given the healing I’ve sought? Why have you let me wander so that I feel desperately lost?

But it turns out, when we feel lost and panicked and beside ourselves, Jesus is not. Was it maddening to Mary that Jesus didn’t rush to her and say, “Mom! Oh, Mom and Dad, I’m so very glad to see you!” No, instead, he questions them. “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. To Jesus, it should have been obvious where to find him. “ Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” And then Luke adds, “But they did not understand what he was saying to him.”

“I don’t understand” is a good thing for souls to know how to say. I don’t understand why I did that. I don’t understand why that had to happen. I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do now. Because the more we think we do understand, perhaps the longer it will take to arrive at who Jesus really is for us. He’s the one who understands, which is why he’s the Savior who leads us on our way.

Our story from Luke might lead us to wonder if, when we feel to have lost Jesus or feel to have lost our way, we are about to learn more about who Jesus really is. To learn more about him than when we thought we had a handle on him, when we knew for sure he was by our side.

Some years ago, author Philip Yancy wrote a book called The Jesus I Never Knew. It’s partly about how he had to lose certain notions of Jesus to find more of Jesus. Yancey wrote, “Sometimes those of us who look for Jesus can’t see past our own noses. … The Cuban government distributes a picture of Jesus with a carbine over his shoulder. During the wars of religion with France, the English used to shout, “The pope is French but Jesus Christ is English!”

If we only look for Jesus as he makes sense to us, maybe it’s no surprise that there are times when we just can’t find him. And maybe there are times we think we’ve found him, but in truth we’re totally lost. In the end, the only one who can really make sense of Jesus is his Father in heaven. That’s why Jesus remained in the Temple when his family went home. “I had to be in my Father’s house,” he said. “I had to be about my Father’s business.”

When Jesus seems to have gone missing, when you don’t know what he’s up to, that doesn’t mean that he’s really lost or that you are either.

There’s an illustration of this in the labyrinth on our bulletins. In the Middle Ages, Christians began to use the labyrinth as an picture of the spiritual life. When you walk a labyrinth, it’s kind of like life, when you keep putting one foot in front of the other even though you kind of feel like you’re going in circles. You just can’t tell what kind of progress you’re making.

But in the labyrinth, with every step you take you’re getting closer to the center. And the way the labyrinth is designed, sometimes, when you are farthest from the center, when you feel most turned around and lost, you’re actually almost there. You don’t know it, but you’ve almost arrived at the place you seek. You have to give up understanding “where you are,” whether you’re close or far from finding the center, and just keep walking.

Jesus was understood to be in the center of the labyrinth. Though life is twisting and turning, and maybe you feel far from him, still, there he is in the center of things. He’s still about God’s business for us, and faith is helping us wait to turn that corner where we realize Jesus is not panicked over our life but is actually at that work. We wait to see how Jesus is revealing more of what is means the he is our Savior.

But when Mary and Joseph turned that last corner into the Temple, and there was Jesus. They went back together to Nazareth, and we’re told that Mary treasured the things happened in Jerusalem deep in her heart. That horrible feeling of Jesus not being there when she wanted him close, in hind sight, it became for Mary occasion for discovering what a profound and surprising treasure Jesus really was.
This wouldn’t be the last time Mary would feel to have lost Jesus, and probably feel lost herself. She thought she lost him again when he left home at thirty, called disciples, and started healing and casting out demons. One day she got so desperate that Mary took Jesus’ brothers to search for him and bring him back home. She thought her son had gone crazy. Eventually, she’d find her son on the cross, where she just stood there losing him. Losing him even he was about his Father’s business, finding us in our sins and forgiving them.

In the last chapter of his gospel, three days after Jesus was lost to death, Luke shows us two despondent travelers who thought Jesus was gone forever. But Jesus meets them and walks with them, though they didn’t recognize who he was. Jesus explained that, in fact, when they thought he was lost to death, the Messiah was really doing God’s saving work, redeeming the world for God.

God’s saving work in our lives, a sense of progress in our living, it can be so elusive. But that doesn’t mean that Jesus working, that he isn’t doing exactly what he must do to be the Savior for us.

In the mid-1950s, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton in the mid-1950s wrote one of the most beautiful and painfully honest prayers I know. It’s a prayer that could be any of ours. Merton prayed:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You.
And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

The promise of Christmas is that God is with us. God comes in Christ to seek and to save the lost. When we feel lost in life, our hope is that Jesus is not. Finding life has never been about knowing where we were going. It has always been about trusting in Christ’s faithful presence every step of the way. Even when we don’t know where to find him, faith tells us we don’t face our perils alone. Amen.