

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: August 13, 2017  
Sermon Title: We Would See Jesus  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: John 12:20-33

## **John 12:20-30**

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*

*'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.*

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Our Scripture is intriguing; I think you'll agree. Evidently, there were some Jewish Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for Passover. This was during Holy Week, and they were curious about this fellow, Jesus. They'd been hearing stories about Jesus. You can imagine: some rumors, some gossip, some exaggeration, some truth. They probably heard about some miracles. Someone repeated one of Jesus's parables, maybe a snippet of one of his teachings. So, heck, they are in Jerusalem. Jesus is in Jerusalem, "Let's meet," they thought! They go to Philip, one of Jesus's disciples, and they say, "We would see Jesus." In modern language, "We would like to see Jesus, meet Jesus."

This is only a couple of days before his crucifixion. Death is very much on Jesus's mind, that's clear from his response. He says, in only a slightly veiled hint at what's coming, "My time is almost done. Sometimes the only way to grow is to appear to die, to be planted in the ground. These people who want to see me, do they know what they are in for? Are they willing to follow me, even to the point of losing this life? As for me, I am ready."

And the Bible tells us at that point a voice from heaven cheered Jesus on in a way that sounded like thunder. There is a lot in those Scriptures, but the part I'm focusing on today is that little bit at the beginning, when those two Greek visitors said, "We would see Jesus."

I first encountered this verse some years ago when I was president of Habitat for Humanity International. In those days, I went all over the country as a guest preacher. One Sunday I was to preach in an old historic church in Baltimore. The pulpit was up high, way above the congregation, and there was a long winding staircase for the preacher to climb to get to the pulpit. When it was time to preach, I climbed the stairs, and when I got a few steps from the top, I saw a sign just below the pulpit, right at eye level. It said, "We would see Jesus."

It was meant to humble the preacher, and most preachers need humbling. Let's face it, preaching is an ego boost. We get to wear special robes; we have a special title, "Reverend," which means we are to be revered; and "Pastor," which means we are in charge. Then, to top it off, we get paid to speak while you sit and listen. So it was a useful reminder in that Baltimore Church, at least, for the last thing I see before I stood in the pulpit, to be those words: "We would see Jesus."

In other words, the congregation isn't there to see me, they're not hungering for the wisdom of David Rowe, I'm not their entertainment or their guru. My job, in that old historic Baltimore Church, and in this old historic New England Church, is to help people "see Jesus."

What got me thinking about this is an experience I had in a Church in Bratislava. I've just returned from three weeks away with enough stories to tell to last a decade. I first began traveling in 1975. I was a pastor of a little Church in upstate New York when off I went to Africa. When I got back to that Church, I couldn't wait to tell them everything, and I mean *everything*. That first Sunday I hit those folks with every experience, every emotion, every detail, every fact, every idea that came from the trip; it all came pouring out of me, a deluge, drowning those poor folks.

I learned then that that after my trips I'm really not able to express my thoughts during the first few weeks. It takes time to debrief, digest, reflect, calm down, make sense of it all. And furthermore, you are not here for a "David Rowe travelogue."

Any of you remember that droll comic from the '60s whose shtick was to do an imaginary slideshow of his latest trip? He'd stand up there on the "Johnny Carson Show," the "Ed Sullivan Show" with a little clicker and a pointer going slowly slide by slide. The humor was in how boring it was, and we don't need that in a sermon, so I'll spread my stories out over the next year.

In fact, the spur for today's sermon came during my first day away. Contrary to my very public love of Prague, I spent most of my time in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, which used to be half of "Czecho-slovakia," a little country next door to Vienna. It was beautiful, uncrowded, perfect in every way for my writing. My hotel was next door to the old town main Church, St. Francis, a typical, ornate, inspiring Catholic Church built in the 1200s. And if you remember those old European cathedrals, the main pulpit is not down front near the altar. It's usually midway down the Cathedral, raised way up above the congregation, facing inward, sideways; not straight forward, but inward.

I'm sitting there in my back pew for the daily Mass, taking it all in. I can't understand the language, so my eyes wander all over the Cathedral: great art, great sculpture, great architecture, great old-fashioned marble pulpit . . . with an arm sticking out of it, holding a cross. I figure it's a sculpture, so after Mass, I climbed the stairs of the pulpit, and when I get up there, by golly, it's just an arm, a stone arm, a disembodied arm, like a mannequin's, sticking out from the pulpit, yep, holding a cross.

The message is pretty clear. Like that Baltimore Church reminding every preacher, every Sunday, that folks come to Church to "see Jesus," this Bratislava church was reminding the preacher that what's important is the cross. Not the architecture. Not the priest. Not the marble. The cross.

Both Churches, the Baltimore Church and the Bratislava Church are saying there's something about Jesus that should be our focus. It may be Jesus in general, as in "We would see Jesus," or Jesus in some particular, it as in the cross sticking out from the pulpit. Either one demands your attention . . . on Jesus.

Often in life we have experiences that make us say to ourselves, "Well, that taught me what's really important." It might be something that brings us to our knees or that scares the daylights out of us or that puts things in perspective. I like that phrase "puts things in perspective." It can mean makes things clearer

*and* it can mean not everything can be front and center. Perspective means there is foreground and background, some things are up front, and some things are not.

September 11 did that for a lot of people. I can't tell you how many people came to this little Church in the weeks after 9/11 to sit here, to look at the cross of God's love, to look out the windows of God's creation, to randomly open the Bible and close their eyes in prayer. Why? Reevaluating everything. Looking for perspective. What's important.

Sickness can do that for us, losing a loved one, unemployment, any of life's transition points: a birth, a marriage, retirement, empty nesting. Both Churches I'm telling you about today, the Church that says, "We would see Jesus" and the Church that sticks an arm out of the pulpit holding a cross, they're both offering to help us get perspective. And the perspective is the fairly straightforward life of Jesus. Something our world really needs.

May I get political for a minute, please? Some things are just too compelling to skip over. Our nation has decided to drum out 6,000 to 10,000 soldiers from our military for being transgender. These are young men and women who volunteered, *volunteered* to serve our country, defend our country, if need be *die* for our country. It wasn't long ago—like a month or so—when our soldiers were heroes. People applauded them in public, went up to them on the street and thanked them for their service. "Support our Troops" was a popular slogan everywhere.

Now, here's the interesting part that connects to our sermon. You might wonder why, with everything on the president's plate, he would take the time to kick these kids out of the military. And it turns out that certain so-called "Christian" leaders who had the president's ear have been pushing this. And that got me thinking: if I had the president's ear, what would I prioritize? What would I focus on? But what would *I* help President Trump put in perspective, see more clearly, have front and center, in the foreground?

The Baltimore Church reminds me that, down deep, folks really would like to "see Jesus," to know him, make some sense of him. The Bratislava Church reminds me that the world needs to see the cross, to see the depth of God's love. So, can I imagine myself flying down to D.C., taking a taxi to the White House, being escorted into the Oval Office, and the president saying to me, "Good morning, Reverend," and I say, "There are a few thousand young people in our army that, for Christ's sake, you need to get rid of them." O.K., I agree this is all absurd. It's absurd for me to bring it into a sermon. But it's absurdity with a point: what's important? And how do we use our faith to gauge what's important?

I mentioned earlier that there are experiences in life that bring us to our knees, that put things in perspective, that force us to say, "Well, now I know what's really important." During my days away, I hired a driver to take me to Poland, to Auschwitz, to the number-one death camp in the whole Nazi machinery of death. I will find another Sunday and other ways to tell the story of that day. For today I'll just tell you this: it brought me to my knees, literally. And it made me focus.

I glimpsed a world where it's right to hunt down the outsider, the different, the other, to hunt them down and, for Christ's sake, get rid of them. But I also glimpsed a world that is hungering to "see Jesus." To *really* see Jesus, or to really see the real Jesus. Not some myth. Not some caricature. Not some weapon or tool.

Those Greek tourists in Jerusalem for Passover wanted to "see the real Jesus." And my Bratislava Church says part of the real Jesus is the cross. As mysterious and as unnerving as the cross is, we need to remember that is how far Jesus went for us . . . and how far we have to be willing to go.

Yesterday, I watched Alida watching television, tears pouring down her face. She was watching the violence in her beloved Charlottesville, Virginia, her family home for three generations. Her grandfather and father were legends in the math department at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Every place you saw on TV yesterday, every blade of grass trampled by hatred, every bit of sidewalk stained by violence, the air that was fouled by verbal filth—that was all Alida's childhood, her playground, her neighborhood. When she was growing up, thinking that most people were good and that good people could really make a difference, all she learned in Charlottesville, at her kitchen table, in her high school classroom, in her Church, on the city streets. The Alida we all love as a model of grace and compassion and peace, all that has its roots in Charlottesville, Virginia.

But this week, her city has been violated, and *here's my point, hear me carefully*, her city has been violated by people who would tell you they're *Christian*. Do any of you doubt me? The ideological underpinnings, even the symbolism and the dress of the "alt-right," the neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, the militias, it all comes from a perverted idea of Christianity.

Do you think I'm exaggerating? Seriously, ask yourself: how many Hindus were there yesterday, taunting, spewing, hating? How many Buddhists? If you went up to each of the haters and asked them what religion they were, what you think you'd get for an answer? Hasidic Jew? Scientologist? Shintoist? Nope! They claim our Jesus and our cross and twist both into their perverseness.

Isn't that a horrible thing to hear? I'm as upset to say it as you are to hear it, but I'm not kidding. I've met the haters. I've read their literature. I've heard their speakers. I've followed the movements from the old KKK to today's "alt-right. They pervert the Jesus that the world wants to "see." They pervert the cross that we need to see projecting from the pulpit. They pervert everything we stand for, everything we hold dear.

We can't sit still while others steal our cross, steal our Christianity, steal our country. We need to do all we can to make sure that when people see us, they see Jesus; and when they hear us, they hear Jesus.

I went away with stories to write; I came home with stories to tell. None more important than that Bratislava Church that reminded me what I need to remember. And Auschwitz that reminded me what I must never forget.

We end today's worship with a hymn we need to take to heart. We're going to sing it as a congregation first, just the first verse, then Wendy is going to touch our hearts, just as she always does, singing that same hymn in her own special way: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," No. 628

*Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand,  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead me on to the light:  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.*

*When my way grows drear,  
Precious Lord, linger near,  
When my life is almost gone,  
Hear my cry, hear my call,  
Hold my hand lest I fall:  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.*

*When the darkness appears  
And the night draws near,  
And the day is past and gone,  
At the river I stand,  
Guide my feet, hold my hand:  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.*