

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon: "My Journey with Jesus"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: My Jesus Litany

## SCRIPTURE My Jesus Litany

Leader: *His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, the Prince of Peace.* (Isaiah 9:16)

Congregation: *You shall call his name "Jesus" because he will save us from our sins.* (Luke 1:31)

Leader: *He is Emmanuel—God with us.* (Matthew 1:23)  
The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, who came from God. Full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Congregation: Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God. (Matthew 16:16)  
He humbled himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:7)

Leader: This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you. (1 Corinthians 11:24)

Congregation: He is gone into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. (1 Peter 3:22)

Leader: I am the good shepherd . . . the vine . . . the gate . . . I am the way, the truth, the life, and the resurrection. (Gospel of John)

All: Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelations 22:20)

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*(David's book has 10 chapters. Over the next several months David will preach a sermon each month or so based on a chapter or two. Sermons will be presented in a way that is not dependent on reading the book.)*

## SERMON

### My Journey with Jesus

Shortly before my mother died, she wrote a note to my father that is carved into their headstone up in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts. In the note she says, "We all need Jesus. He gives us hope. Heaven will be when we are together again."

That's the essence of my mother's faith in a nutshell, the theology of a demure Swedish lady. She trusts in Jesus for this life and the next life; she believed that Jesus is the right guide for this life, the right guarantor of eternal life. There's no doctrine there, no dogma, no "my way or the highway." Just the person, the presence, the purpose of a man called Jesus.

My faith mirrors my mother's, but my journey to that faith was more convoluted. But we end up in the same place. My mother's gentle faith echoes that great old hymn, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, oh, what a foretaste of glory divine."

Assurance is wonderful in anything in life, and rare. Assurance gives us confidence. It's something you can count on. "Jesus is mine," the hymn sings, just like my book title, *My Jesus*. The possessive ringing loud and clear in both.

That connection, that relationship, that trust, that's our "blessed assurance." *Which*, the hymn promises, is a "foretaste of glory divine." That's what my mother was getting at on her deathbed, that the faith that gave her joy and purpose and direction and love for 65 years and peace of mind near death was only the beginning, the foretaste of the joy that awaits us.

Jesus is a monumental consequential figure striding across the centuries of history, a singular personage. I can tell you without exception I have never met a single person who had a negative word about him. Not one. Oh, some think he was too naïve, too idealistic; but willfully naïve and sweetly idealistic. They don't hold it against him. We'd all like to be who Jesus was, and we'd like everybody to be what Jesus thought we are capable of. There is an effervescent niceness to Jesus's life *and* to Jesus's expectations for our lives.

I must tell you I've spoken with a lot of anti-Christians, vehemently anti-Christian. I've been accosted and beaten just for answering their question: "Are you a Christian?"

I've read all the top literature, listened to the top speakers on atheism and anti-Christianity. It's harsh, brutal, stinging. Yet, there's never a word against Jesus. But there are 2,000 years of religious history of people thinking through who this Jesus is, what he stands for, what he means for today and for us.

On one hand, he's this really, really, really super good guy, the best of the best. Or, he's Christus Rex, King Jesus, triumphant over death, sin, and evil, the ultimate victor.

In religious art, we get the Baby Jesus of Christmas, a little cherub . . . or the gory, tortured, crucified Christ of Good Friday. Innocent and pure . . . suffering and triumphant. He can be all of that, yet more.

But we're not Renaissance artists, making great art for Popes and cathedrals to someday hang in great museums. We are not theologians trying to parse every hidden gem or meaning and turn it into esoteric doctrine, both true and opaque.

We're not Crusaders trying to reclaim the Holy Land for ourselves. We are not Inquisitors trying to weed out heretics. Nor are we heretics trying to uproot tradition. You and I, we are just trying to figure out what, of Jesus, gets us through the day, and guides us on our way, not to get too poetic about it.

To do that, my book invites us on a journey. Two thousand years of Jesus's thinking, 2,000 years of making sense of Jesus, 2,000 years of trying to apply Jesus to our daily life, 2,000 years of deciding whether he has any meaning or relevance for us.

Sure, we've got theology. We've got Biblical scholarship. We've got Church history and traditions. We've got creeds and dogma, music and art, Saints and Popes and Preachers. But ultimately, bottom line, back to basics, keeping it simple, it comes down to you and to me—what is Jesus to us? How personal, how intimate, how real can we make it?

Among the stories I tell in the book is one about Alida and me going to rock 'n' roll concerts—especially Bruce Springsteen for Alida and Green Day for me. And how it has been our experience, several times, that on the way home, I'll say to Alida after a Springsteen concert, and Alida will say to me after Green Day concert, "Did you see how he looked right at you when he was singing that song?"

We know it's silly, we know it's not possible, we know there were 15,000, 30,000, 40,000 people at the concerts, but it sure felt as though they were singing right at us. Real. Personal. Intimate. That's the way it is with Jesus.

In today's Scripture Litany, I arranged a variety of verses that range from Jesus as majestic, to Jesus as down to earth. You've heard them all before: He is "wonderful, counselor, Almighty God," "the way, the truth, and the life," "the Christ, the Son of the living God." *and*, he's "the good shepherd," "made in human likeness," "taking the very nature of a servant," "the word become flesh," "God with us." It is personal.

When my daughter Cameron was a little girl, five or seven years old, I took her to summer camp with me, where I was Director of Teenagers. It was a really old, really rustic camp. We slept in a wood cabin, no electricity, on the side of a mountain in Vermont. Lots of creepy crawly things all around us, slithering things under the floorboards. It was scary: my daughter and I were city people, not slithering, crawling, snake and spider, wood cabin, mountainside people.

That first night, we climbed into bed, and after a few moments, my daughter said, "Daddy, are you awake?" "Yes," I assured her, thinking that was enough. Silence. A few moments later, "Daddy, is your face toward me?" "Yes, Cammie, my face is toward you." And with that, she slept soundly till morning.

Jesus is God's face turned toward us. That's as simple, personal, real as it gets. I'm not anti-intellectual, anti-theology, anti-grand thoughts; I'm not anti-Trinity, anti-Virgin Birth, anti-Transubstantiation, or any of the brainteasers that mystify our faith. I'm not anti-being mystified. I love awe and splendor and majesty in religion. I love Bible people who are larger than life, Bible verses that push the envelope, Bible stories that stretch way beyond fact. I love ideas that stop me in my tracks.

But you know what? I wake up every morning at 5:32, go to bed usually by 9:30. In between I deal with everything life throws at me, the fullest range, good and bad. And doctrine doesn't help me with that. Theology doesn't help me. Neither the Virgin Birth, nor the Trinity, nor Moses parting the Red Sea helps me with that.

Instead, always, there's some aspect of Jesus that cuts through every issue, something he said, something he did, some connection to me, some story, some verse, something in his approach, his spirit, well, his love.

And we bring that to every encounter of every day, every challenge, every obstacle, every fear . . . *and* every joy.

Since this sermon series is based on chapters from the book, I'll send you off with this story from Chapter 2.

### **"My Journey with Jesus"**

*I was sent away to boarding school shortly after my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. That's how it was put in those days: "sent away to boarding school." Nobody in my neighborhood knew what boarding school was, exactly. Reform School we knew, because of the older young hoods, the kids in my gang that got caught. Prison we knew, for uncles and cousins and neighbors who disappeared. One day you're in the neighborhood, the next day you're not.*

*But boarding school? Even I had no idea what I was heading to.*

*Who knew it would be a thousand acres of pristine woods in the idyllic Berkshires, founded by America's most famous evangelist? At the Mount Hermon School for Boys, we were required to play sports and be with our friends, without parents around, and with seconds for dinner. It was more than a fair trade-off for the equally mandatory work, chapel, and Bible courses. A good life.*

*My parents were more anxious. Along with the five dollars in spending money to last until Thanksgiving, they gave me a framed picture of Jesus. Just Jesus, not doing anything in particular, more like posing for a photo, looking straight ahead.*

*Coming from a very Christian family and now being at a very Christian school, I put the framed Jesus on my desk. The next day, when I came back from class, Jesus has been moved from my desk. I put him back in his place, but the next day it happened again. And again. Every day I would return to my room from sports, class, meal, date, or punishment detail, and Jesus would be somewhere else. Sometimes upside down or on his side, or behind books, or stuffed in the closet. Jesus was my Elf on the Shelf long before that was a thing.*

*Clearly, my roommate was the culprit. But as a 13-year-old city kid stuck with a stranger, I wasn't sure how to confront him about Jesus-stealing or Jesus-moving or Jesus-envy.*

*My roommate finally told me, right after my father made a surprise visit and couldn't find my Jesus. "The eyes," my roommate confessed, "his eyes follow me wherever I go. So first I turned it upside down, but then he looked angry." "Look," he said, taking my Jesus and turning him upside down on my desk. Sure enough, he looked angry. And sure enough, when I thought about it, everywhere I went in the room, Jesus had been looking at me. Intensely, if he was upright, as if very interested. Angry, as if he had been disrespected in some move.*

*What does this story teach? Well, at that stage of my life, Jesus was very real. He was on top of things. He was capable of attitude. He followed you.*

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All these years later, with a lifetime of experience under my belt, a lot of life lived and lessons learned, with all my studies and degrees, it is still true: Jesus is very real. He's on top of things. He's capable of attitude. He follows me, intensely.

Our final hymn today is "My Jesus, I Love Thee," No. 349 in your Hymnal.

*My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine,  
for thee all the follies of sin I resign;  
my gracious Redeemer, my Savior art thou;  
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*

*I love thee because thou hast first loved me,  
and purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree;  
I love thee for wearing the thorns on thy brow;  
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*

*In mansions of glory and endless delight,  
I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright;  
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow:  
if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.*