

Go, Make Disciples, Baptize, Teach
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Matthew's Easter gospel begins in a miracle. The miracle of miracles: Resurrection. And it ends with what we call The Great Commission: Go make disciples, baptize, teach. The last words, a promise: "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I

It was dawn on Sunday, The third day since Jesus' death. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb where he lay.

An earthquake shook the earth. The angel of the Lord descended, rolled the stone away from the tomb and sat upon the stone. He shone like lightning. At the sight of him the Roman soldiers guarding the tomb fainted away like dead men. It was a political/theological statement: Jesus is alive, the Roman soldiers are dead. Caesar is not Lord, Christ is. The political realm is not the ultimate realm, the kingdom of God is.

The angel said to the women: "Be not afraid. And then the unimaginable news:

For I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen.

Then twin commands from the angel: *Come and see*, then *Go and tell*. ‘Come and see where he lay, and go tell the disciples that he has risen from the dead. The risen Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. There they will see him.’ I love the thought that Jesus is going ahead of us, blazing the trail, beckoning us to follow.

The women now become the first evangelists of the Resurrection. Where were the men? Matthew has told us: “They forsook him and fled (Matthew 26:56).” Only the women saw him through it all, the death, the burial, and now at Sunday’s open tomb. Principal among the women was Mary Magdalene, the one constant figure in all four Easter gospels.

II

And as they went, the Easter miracle is completed: not just the empty tomb but also now the appearances of the Risen Christ. They went, the text says, “with fear and great joy.” Reverence, awe, fright, wonderment, joy all mixed together. Like when we witness the birth of a child.

Then the Risen Christ appeared to them. “Greetings,” he said, or something like that. Then the women fell at his feet and worshipped him. Worshipped him

as we do on Easter: Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia. Crown him with many crowns.

Then Jesus said, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

III

See him they did. When he appeared to them the text says, “They worshipped him but some doubted.” How human, how like us: faith and doubt all mixed together. “I believe, help thou my unbelief”, the man once said to Jesus—and it was good enough.

Faith is not possible without some measure of doubt, for faith is always a leap. Faith is what we think, feel, do when the evidence is not all in. As Hebrews says, “Faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the evidence of things *not seen*.”

Faith without doubt turns into fanaticism. Frederick Buechner says that doubt is the ants in the pants of faith: it keeps it alive and moving. And he wrote: “If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

IV

Then Jesus took them to a mountain and gave them “The Great Commission”, Jesus’ great Easter command.

First, as you go make disciples of all nations, all peoples. The gospel is for all else it is not the gospel. Unless the gospel includes all, it might not include me. If it didn't forgive all, I'd not be forgiven.

Make disciples of all people. If you want a more exclusive club, Statesville can offer a wide array of choices. But Jesus offers us this : the assuredly-broken-but-being-redeemed people of God. If you mind who else is included, it might not be the place for you.

And *make disciples*. Dallas Willard likes the term “apprentice” for disciple. What is an apprentice?

Someone who had decided to be with another person under appropriate conditions in order to be capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is.

That's what we decide to do when we become disciples of Jesus: We promise to be with him under appropriate conditions in order to do what he does and become what he is. We can never equal the Master, but that does not disqualify us. We learn and learn and learn, practice, practice, practice. And as for the appropriate conditions? The church, the Body of Christ who has been learning of him for 20 centuries.

And *baptizing* them, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism is the most complete emblem of the Christian life. It means at least these eight things:

1) *Following Jesus*, joining his way in the world. As he was baptized, in imitation of him, we are baptized.

2) *Becoming the Beloved*. At his own baptism Jesus heard God saying, “You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I take delight.” So when we are baptized God says, “You are my beloved daughter, son in whom I am well pleased, in whom I take delight.” Baptism announces the truth of who we are: the Beloved.

3) *An Affirmation of Faith*: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” These four words are the ancient baptismal confession of faith. When I baptize people I ask them to affirm their faith with those four words: Jesus Christ is Lord.

4) *The Washing Away of Sins*. All of them, not some of them. When you are immersed in the waters of baptism you get completely wet, wet through and through. So God forgives all our sins.

5) *A New Family of Faith*. Baptism is our entrance into a community of faith. Christianity is not a solo journey. We are on this journey of faith together.

6) *A New Birth and a New Creation.* We are born anew, of the Spirit. And we enter into God's New Creation, what God is up to in the world. God is transforming the Old Creation with its divisions, bigotries and hatreds into a New World of reconciliation and love.

7) *A Dying and a Rising.* Going under the water and coming up out of the water symbolize a dying and a rising. A dying to the false self and the birth of the true self. It means death and resurrection in the daily ways we experience this miracle, and it signifies the final dying and rising as we pass through death into the eternal arms of God.

8) *An Anointing of the Holy Spirit* for our own ministry of love in the world. When I baptize people I lay hands on them as a sign of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is the ordination of the whole people of God to be ministers in the world.

If you have never been baptized, I hope you will have this beautiful experience. Come, talk with me if you are interested. We could baptize you in the baptismal pool in the church. Or go to the lake. *Being a Christian means to give as much of yourself as you can to as much of Christ as you know.* Then there's the great adventure of discovering more and more of yourself to give and discovering more and more of Christ to give yourself to.

VI

And *teach*: “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

Matthew is supremely the teaching gospel. It contains the Sermon of the Mount.

What would Christianity be without the Sermon of the Mount?

I have been preaching the commanded things through Lent. On Easter Nancy Davis expanded them—as I will now.

First, the three love commands.

Love the Lord you God with all your heart mind soul and strength and love
you neighbor as yourself

Love your enemies

Love one another

Then, here are some of my favorites

Turn around and believe the good news

Follow me

Let your light shine

Consider the lilies

Be not anxious

Learn of me

Ask, see, knock

Permit the children to come to me

Sell and give

Shake the dust

Judge not

Turn the cheek

Stretch out your hand

Take up your cross

Remember me

Be not afraid

Go, make disciples, baptize and teach

The commands are liberating commands. They are *meeting places* with God.

They give moral fiber to the Christian faith. Christianity without Jesus' teachings is a truncated faith, a Christianity without a backbone.

Then the last words: the Great Promise that goes with the Great Commission. “Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Always. You are not alone. You never will be.

Matthew began his gospel with this announcement:

Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means *God-with-us*.

Now it ends with the promise: “Lo, I am *with you* always.”

Jesus is the aloneness of God made flesh and is now so eternally. He will be with us not just in the past, or in the present, but forever, to the end of the age. Jesus is “the faithfulness of God at the heart of things.”

We meet him when we least expect it—like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, we meet him in worship, around the Lord’s Table, we meet him as we encounter saints and strangers, we meet him in the least of these, in the beauty of the sunrise or sunset, in “flowering meadow and flashing sea”. We meet him in loving embrace. He is with us in the best of times and worst of times. As Corrie Ten Boom said from the horrors of Nazi death camps: No matter how deep the darkness, he is deeper still.

All this because on Easter some women came saying “He is Risen.”

We have remembered Martin Luther King, Jr. this week on the 50th anniversary of his assassination. During the Montgomery boycott Martin Luther King received phone calls threatening to blow his brains out. He was in his kitchen, deeply shaken and terrified, full of self-doubt. He called out to God. Here is what happened, in King's words:

I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.

Those words saw him through to the end of his life. They see us through.