**You Are Not Alone**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

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**Matthew 28:16-20**

These are the final five verses in the gospel of Matthew. This scene takes place later on the day of the resurrection. Matthew’s account of the resurrection is unique. It begins with Mary Magdalene and another Mary going to the tomb. There is no reference to why they have come to the tomb. They are not carrying spices to prepare the body as recorded by Mark and Luke. The stone has not been removed as likewise chronicled by Mark and Luke in their resurrection accounts. In Matthew’s gospel the stone is in place when the women arrive and there is an earthquake caused by a descending angel coming from heaven and pushing the stone out of the way. The women are frightened but the angel tells them to not be afraid; that Jesus is not in the tomb but has been raised and that he is on his way to Galilee where they will see him. As they are making their way out of the garden Jesus appears to them. They fall at his feet to worship. He does not spurn them nor seem to hurry the exchange along as the Jesus of John seems to in his conversation with Mary Magdalene. Jesus tells them to not be afraid and to go tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee.

In the meantime the guards report the earthquake and the empty tomb and are bribed by the chief priests to say that his disciples came in the night while they slept and stole the body away. Matthew records that many believe this to be the truth to this very day; that his disciples stole the remains and that there was no resurrection. And then these final five verses follow up the story; ending the day and the entire gospel.

Jesus meets his disciples at an appointed hilltop where we are informed that some worshipped and some doubted. And then he commissions them to go; baptize; teach and remember that he is will be with them always; even to the close of the age.

There is something simple and straight forward about Matthew’s account of the resurrection and it covers the gamut of experience. It opens with grieving women wanting to be near to the place where he has been laid. There is natural phenomena and the supernatural with reference to earthquakes and angels. There is the appearance of Jesus and the instruction to go to Galilee. There is drama and dishonesty with bribery of the guards, the manipulation of the priests, the doubts of some of the disciples in tandem with the joy and worship and the culmination with the great commissioning: I have been given all authority in heaven and earth. So with that authority I charge you to do the following. Go. Baptize. Teach. Remember.

I would like to put the command to baptize and teach in parenthesis. These are important instructions given to disciples to heed and obey but as I stand here alone in this sacred space what captures my imagination is the report that some who were there had their doubts. Hard to go, baptize, teach and remember if one does not trust what one is seeing and hearing. And the final words resonate in a deeper way for me at this moment, as I speak to an empty sanctuary and know not when, or if, I will stand among you again. Remember I am with you always. The significance of doubt within the Christian narrative and the reminder that especially in the face of doubt, we are not alone mingle together today in a dance of intimate mutuality.

I feel alone as I stand here and share this reflection. I know that I am not alone. In addition to the assurance of God in Christ that I will be accompanied by the unseen companion throughout my life, I am a part of an unseen crowd of witnesses; a family that stretches throughout the world; but I am alone here. And this sacred space, that is so warm and inviting; that enfolds us in a loving embrace when we gather together looms large in the emptiness. I am alone; but I am not lonely.

Garret Keizer, an American minister tells of conducting the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night in his little church with only two attendees. The Easter Vigil is the first celebration of the resurrection and takes place in some churches on the evening of Holy Saturday. Many have attended a Good Friday service on the previous day and many anticipate the Easter celebration to come on Sunday morning so these services can be sparsely attended. The minister lit the Pascal candle and recited the first prayer. He says, The candle sputters in the half- darkness like a voice too embarrassed or overwhelmed to proclaim the news, “He is risen.”. But it catches fire, and there we are, three people and a flickering light in an old church on a Saturday evening in the spring, with the noise of the cars and their rusted winter mufflers outside. The moment is filled with ambiguities of all such quiet observances among few people, in the midst of an oblivious population in a radically secular age. The act is so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme: the Lord is with us or we are pathetic fools.

The world may judge us as pathetic fools but there is something powerfully inspiring about the candle that sputters in the dark and that nonetheless instills hope. Two or three gather together and God is among them. I sit alone in this sanctuary sometimes to bask in the red shadow of the migrating cross as it moves across the face of the chancel and am grounded. The cross is not firmly planted on Calvary’s hill for all time but makes its daily pilgrimage throughout the world; reminding us all that suffering continues to be a very real issue for all of humankind., Where humanity is, there is also suffering. And where there is suffering there is the presence of Grace. What the world sees as pathetic, we interpret as empowering; what some see as naiveté we interpret as faith. When his disciples saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted. Jesus does not admonish or belittle them for their understandable reticence. He gets straight to it. Strike while the iron is hot. No time to languish in uncertainty nor to retreat to their former lives. Go. Baptize. Teach. Remember. Take your doubts and reservations with you but Go. Act. Remember. This text is significant for us as we continue to prepare ourselves for my pending retirement.

We stand at the apex of change; my ministry ending and a new one about to take root. We are a resurrection people and there are no endings only new beginnings. We may experience a gamut of emotions in the face of change; not unlike the disciples on the mountain on the day of resurrection. Some doubted what stood before them but others worshipped; and to the doubters and believers alike the great commission was given.

A minister recalls attending a graduation where a young high school senior recounted her faith journey through losing and finding it again. Her story was not one of unwavering faith. Rather, the young lady spoke of how she took her faith for granted as a child and so was unprepared for the day when her academic learning and her own life experience called it into question. Indeed, she spoke specifically of her anger at God when a good friend was diagnosed with cancer. And she spoke of spending a long night with this life-long friend watching as he peacefully took his last breath. She spoke of how her prayers moved from anger to acceptance to gratitude and she spoke of how she came to understand God as one who walked with her.

 Her words were honest and mature and faithful in a way one does not always hear. It was authentic, moving and empowering for all assembled and touched the heart and soul of the minister who shares the story. But the story does not end with the testimonial of a young high school graduate, because after the young lady spoke an ordained minister got up to address the graduates and the attendees. Only, in direct and disturbing contrast to the young lady’s powerful witness, he spoke of a time when he was called in to pray with and for a friend who had cancer and of how the cancer left him never to return.

Ouch.

Though perhaps it was not meant in that way, one could be left understanding that if one only has enough faith, God will give you whatever you want. The minister who recalls the story felt deep empathy for the young lady, preferring her more realistic account of the bumpy road of faith and knowledge because she told her own true story of a journey from faith through doubt to faith again. And her understanding of God’s presence became more real to her not because God bowed to her yearning or whim. But simply because God made God’s own self known to her in her darkness.

Jesus stood with his motley band of followers, some who were ready to jump on the bandwagon and some who were more than a little reticent, and said all authority in heaven and on earth is mine. In contrast to the tentativeness of the disciples this statement of Jesus is as solid as a rock. On the basis of that authority Jesus commissions his disciples to go. To Baptize. To teach. To remember. The final words in the gospel of Matthew are words to ground, not only his hand -picked disciples but all who have chosen to follow in faith “And remember I am with you always; to the end of the age. Words to hold close to our hearts as we continue to worship in isolation and experience the distance. Remember, I am with you. You are not alone.

We can’t go anywhere because of restrictions on unnecessary travel. Baptisms have been postponed and study groups, choir practices and book cubs canceled. We really can’t do three of the four things commended of the disciple in the great commissioning. So that leaves the final words attributed to Jesus by the author of the Matthew and the summation of his gospel, and remember I am with you always, to the end of the age. Matthew ends his gospel with the assurance that disciples will never be alone.

A minister discovers the truth of these words when he invites congregants to attend an Easter Vigil and only 2 show up. It would have been easy to send the two faithful members home with a better luck next year but the pascal candle was lit. The three may have seemed small in the tiny sanctuary and the quiet in the sacred space eclipsed by the noise of traffic outside as people went on with their daily responsibilities and tasks unaware of the three gathered inside the church. But the three had sought refuge from the daily grind and had made the decision to sit in vigil between the suffering of the crucifixion and before the dawn of the resurrection. In the not yet of resurrection and with the sting of death being mused the candle sputtered and did not go out. The population outside attending to task before the celebration of Easter oblivious to the sacred solemnity that was taking place among the three. Items being checked off of lists before the stores closed and three inside aware only of the light of the candle; the words of hope read and the assurance of God’s love throughout history heralded. In the not yet of resurrection hope there is the reminder that we are not alone.

A young lady shares her faith journey from the innocence of childhood, through the doubt during adolescence and testing when one whom she dearly loved became ill and died. She cries out to God in anger, acceptance and gratitude when she comes to fully understand that not only was her friend unforsaken by God but the same God who came to accompany her friend on the next leg of his journey was attendant with her in her vigil, her grief and deepening awareness. In the not yet of trust and in the desperation for answers to unanswerable questions we are not alone.

WE may not be able to go anywhere, baptize anyone or attend a study group or service together. But we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.