



“Don’t Just Sit There”

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The Sunday after Easter has been, in previous centuries, a Sunday for holy laughter. The custom has been resurrected (as it were) in recent years. In the ancient church, it was known as the *risus paschalis*, because everything sounds better in Latin. The custom was so embraced in the early church that the Pope had to send instructions to tone it down. The last thing you want is people having fun in church.

So, to begin this Holy Humor Sunday, and yet not to wander far from the matter before us, I’ll tell you a true story. When I was in seminary, and sitting for the standard ordination exams, which are required of all candidates for ministry, it was time to take the theology exam. Closed book, three hours, all students in one classroom, blue books at the ready. We opened the test and the first question for our consideration was: “Discuss the doctrine of the ascension.” It was a little odd, but off we went.

Except for Ray. My buddy Ray just sat there - stunned. The question might as well have been written in Welsh. The clock was running. I’m writing my brains out about the Great Commission - because there’s nothing that Presbyterians like more than *talking* about evangelism - and nothing we like less than *doing* evangelism. Ray is a statue.

Finally, after an hour, I noticed Ray write one sentence and turn in his blue book. When I finished, I turned in my blue *books* and left the room to find Ray standing in the hallway. “What is the doctrine of the ascension?” he asked me. “I’ve never heard it called a ‘doctrine,’” I replied, “so I wrote about the Great Commission.” “What did you write?” I asked. Ray replied, “The only thing I could think of. ‘Beam me up Scotty, there’s no intelligent life down here.’”

You may be a little puzzled as to why we're talking about the Ascension today. It was just last Sunday that Jesus was raised from the dead. Here we are, just one week later, talking about Jesus' ultimate departure. In about six weeks, we'll be celebrating Ascension Sunday, the Sunday before Pentecost. What's going on here?

We've spent the Sundays since Christmas in Matthew's gospel. When you focus on one gospel, you have to stay true to it. When it comes to Matthew's gospel, there is really no Ascension. There are no clouds that overshadow Jesus and lift him into the heavens. There is no gravity-defying exit. Frankly, if we are faithful to Matthew's gospel, we don't know what happened to Jesus' physical presence, following the resurrection, which may lead us to conclude that the resurrection had nothing to do with physical presence.

We find Jesus on a mountain-top in Galilee. That shouldn't surprise us. Jesus was taken to a mountain-top during his temptation. Jesus began his public ministry on a mountain-top from which he gave his sermon. Jesus went to a mountain-top to be transfigured. And here is Jesus, on a mountain-top at the last, ready to depart. In the "thin-ness" of a mountain-top, where heaven and earth, thing temporal and eternal, seem to commingle, Jesus offers his disciples a final word.

Now, I spent no small amount of time studying the original Greek of this text. I consulted ancient dictionaries and lexicons. I read a couple of versions of it in Aramaic, which is quite something, considering I have no idea of how to read Aramaic. And the best translation I can offer you of Jesus' words is, "Don't just sit there." It is, quite possibly, more of a paraphrase than a translation.

The New Revised Standard Version puts it this way:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

All the parables, all the miracles, all the conflicts, all the challenges to tradition and convention have been for a purpose. What Jesus came to do has been completed. Jesus' work is done.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The One who spoke of welcome, gratitude, inclusivity, forgiveness - the One who had been unjustly and mercilessly tried and executed - the One who had been raised, defeating death - has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth." The Kingdom of Heaven, about which Jesus has preached, spun out parables, and declared and demonstrated in action, has begun.

But the world is not yet what it was created to be. What Jesus began was the possibility that the world could be as God created it to be. Like a gardener, Jesus has prepared the soil and carefully planted the seed. But, like any gardener will tell you, that is merely the beginning. What is to become of the garden remains to be seen.

The Kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus came to share, has begun. The ground has been prepared. The seed has been carefully planted. And the gardener will no longer be present.

How is this garden to grow? Who is meant to tend the seed of the Kingdom of Heaven that has been planted? Who will keep the weeds and life-diminishing forces from killing the seedlings and eliminating the harvest?

The shocking answer is that Jesus is looking to his disciples - then and now. Those who follow Jesus, who place their trust in him, who see the truth of his words and the authenticity of his example will be the ones through whom Jesus accomplishes and completes his work. Through their faithful discipleship, the gospel will go into all the world, new disciples will be created, and the Kingdom of Heaven will expand and expand and enlarge until the world is what God created it to be.

And even more shockingly, those disciples include us. If God's plan for the creation is ever to be realized, it will be because of disciples like you and me. That's a little scary, I know. God is counting on us.

I used to believe that if we could just get the right people elected to the right offices, things would be better. History has proven that to be partly true, but the greater evidence is that it is not true. I used to believe that if we could just pass the right laws that were so clearly and sensibly written that things would be just and fair. I used to believe that compassion and understanding were so clearly the norm of human behavior that they barely needed to be mentioned.

But I was wrong.

What I now know is that the Kingdom of Heaven - the Realm of God - its existence and reality - is up to people of faith. The authority that Jesus gives is not given to governments or politics. It is given to people of faith - people who trust in God - people who see the world as God sees it - to join with God to make the world what God intended it to be.

And we are foolish to believe that that work is the work of the church alone. That work is shared work with faithful Muslims, faithful Jews, and faithful believers of other traditions. When people of faith join together and work together for the well-being and betterment of God's creation, the world is a softer, kinder place and God smiles.

In its broadest and most profound sense, the Great Commission is Jesus authorizing us to continue his work. It means that we invite and welcome all people to the table of grace and blessing. It means not just talking about our faith and debating doctrine and dogma. It means remembering that sometimes Jesus meets us in our lives, “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” When we live the lessons that Jesus gave us, the world sees, takes notice, and is changed. And, my friends, the Kingdom of Heaven is the change for which the world desperately longs.

Jesus’ final words to his disciples - and that means you and me - in the Gospel of Matthew are these: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Trot back to the beginning of Matthew’s gospel - back where we began months ago - and you read these words:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.”

“I am with you” - “God with us.” Matthew’s a pretty good writer. We end where we began.

We are not alone. We are not left to our own abilities. We are not left to our own brilliance. “I am with you always.” Thanks be to God!

So, there it is. Don’t just sit there. None of us have that calling. Don’t just sit there. Jesus is risen! And the Kingdom of Heaven is in our hands.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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