

JESUS

There's no one like Him

Jesus is not a myth or legend. Jesus is not an ethereal religious figure. Jesus walked the earth at a specific time and place. There's never been another like Him. As we follow the life of Jesus of Nazareth through the Gospel of Matthew, we find our faith in Jesus rooted in the life of Jesus. Meet Jesus. Knowing this man will change your life.

JESUS • Matthew 28:10–20 • Jennifer Holz • April 19, 2020

Good morning, First Pres and friends. It's odd not to see you here with us, but know that we miss you and love you, and as a staff we are praying for you daily. We are finishing our **Jesus** series on this first Sunday after Easter. Our Scripture today takes us to the end of Matthew when Jesus' disciples gather to meet Him for the first time after His resurrection. I can imagine it's a meeting full of hope and wonder and fear and awe. It's a moment that begins with worship and moves into mission. In these verses, Jesus extends His mission to the disciples, commissioning them to God's work in the world.

The Great Commission is all about going. But I suppose one of the questions on our minds today is how do we "go!" when we've been ordered to "stay"? Great question! We'll get there. Open your Bibles to Matthew 28:10-20. We pick up with Jesus talking to the two Marys who are the first ones to encounter Him after His resurrection. Listen to the word of God.

"Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.' While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'"

Our sister church in Havana, Cuba is closed right now because of the coronavirus. They don't have the great access to internet, so they can't send out a livestream service or join Zoom in small groups. Pastor Liudmila can send a few words over email, but she and her team have had to be creative in thinking about how the church "comes together" in this time. Every morning Pastor Liudmila heads to the church, climbs the steps to the bell tower and rings the bell at 9 a.m. It's a call to prayer that rings out through the city. Her church hears the bell and drops to their knees to pray. They are reminded they are not alone in their isolation. Likewise, everyone nearby hears the bell as well and knows that the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Havana, Cuba is praying for them.

On Easter Sunday church bells rang out across our nation signaling the Lord's resurrection. Ours rang at 12:15. On the first day of his resurrection, Jesus gives the commission to ring the bell of good news in every corner of the globe. The movement of Jesus' continues--it is about to explode onto the world stage. Today 2.3 billion followers of Jesus continue to sound the bell of the gospel, sharing in every nation the message that Christ is risen indeed. And we are a part of that movement in this moment in history. We too get to ring the gospel bell!

Matthew 28 moves quickly. Jesus has been raised from the dead. Mary and Mary (as we talked about last week) get up and go to the tomb early, at dawn. They see a remarkable site: the tomb has been opened. An angel speaks to them of Jesus' resurrection and instructs them to go tell the disciples that Jesus is going to meet them in Galilee. Filled with fear and joy, they quickly make their way back to the disciples, but an incredible thing happens. Jesus meets them. They fall down in worship, and Jesus repeats the instructions to go tell the disciples. While Mary and Mary are rushing to tell the news that "Jesus is alive," another group is still trying to write a different ending to Jesus' story. They killed Him once, and now they are trying to kill Him again. He isn't alive. We'll say His body has merely been stolen. They are fiercely committed to this story being finished. They want Jesus to go away, to stop being the central character of everything. They've been trying to force this narrative all through the gospels, but they can't seem to bring Jesus' story to conclusion. But nothing, Matthew tells us, can keep Jesus in the grave. You see, Jesus' movement and mission can't be stopped. There is no end to what Jesus has started.

As the book of Matthew closes, a new chapter begins with the "great commission" of Jesus. When the disciples meet up with Jesus in Galilee, He extends the mission to them. It's still our mission today--2,000 years later. Real words spoken by the real Jesus in a real time and place.

Here are three simple reflections on this Scripture to fill us with hope and remind us of our call to sound the bell of the good news.

Reflection 1: The whole world is in Jesus' hands.

There's a little song we sing--kids you all probably know this one-- "He's got the whole world in his hands." Matthew 28 is one of many scriptures that makes that little song true. What we learn from this extraordinary story is that Jesus is at work in the whole world--said a different way ... **there is not a person or place in the whole world where Jesus is not already at work.**

In these verses, when Jesus uses the words "All, Everything and Always," it's not merely for effect or hyperbole for the sake of emphasis, it's truth.

All authority (vs. 18)

all nations" (vs. 19)

I am with you always (vs. 20)

obey everything (vs. 20)

Matthew's final words are marked by a sense of wholeness. Before Jesus asks us to do anything, He reminds us that everything belongs to Him. As Eugene Peterson writes, "Christ plays in 10,000 Places." Meaning everything is already His. The mission Jesus gives His followers is surrounded, enveloped, started and completed by Jesus with the Father and Holy Spirit. As my theology teacher used to say, "the whole God is fully at work in the whole world always." We simply get the invitation to be a part of all God is doing in our world.

Last week we worshipped from the rooftop of First Pres. Those were marvelous services. Looking out over the city, the empty cross stood tall above this beautiful place where we live. It reminded me that our worship leads us right into the city where God is at work. It also reminded me of downtown Los Angeles 1987 when U2, arguably the biggest band on the planet, set up on a rooftop at the corner of 7th and Main. Their intent was to draw a crowd to shut down the surrounding streets and cause a big disruption. "If

there's one thing in LA people hate it's having their streets shut down," they said. The gig was eventually shut down by authorities, but that was kind of the plan. Music should shake things up. Well, I don't think our rooftop services shut down our city--our city is already shut down--but the resurrection of Jesus disrupted everything. It changed the course of history. Jesus calls the disciples back together--the great commission is now underway. There is a whole world to tell. Eternal life has been accomplished--the great restoration is moving out.

When the disciples "see" Jesus for the first time after His death, we read, "When they saw him, they worshiped him..." (vs. 28:17a). They see Him for who He really is, the risen Lord. When one finds themselves in the presence of God, the only response is worship. This is Matthew's way of saying--they see Jesus as God. For Matthew, worship is the ultimate response to the God of the universe. "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only" (4:10).

Although the church building is closed, we are still gathering for worship every week. Worship is our first response. Worship is what we are created for: to serve, love and worship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the triune community of love and light and life. The disciples' first response was worship. When we worship Jesus, we find ourselves totally free and available to love this world and our neighbor as Jesus commands us. In worship we understand that the burden of the world rests on Christ. He's the one who carries the world, who holds it in His hands. Nobody loves the world or your neighbor more than Jesus does. In worship we affirm that Jesus holds all things together.

Reflection 2: Jesus calls us into mission just as we are.

"Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:16-17).

We read that the "eleven" showed up; there are no longer 12. They have been diminished. The last we read of the disciples, Judas had taken his own life, Peter had denied Jesus three times, the remaining group was hiding in the upper room, terrified of what would happen next. Only the women and John stayed at the cross to the end. It was not one of the 12, but Joseph of Arimathea, who stepped forward to bury Jesus' body. It was Mary and Mary who bravely showed up at the tomb on Sunday morning to take care of the body. In our Scripture today, Matthew writes that they worshipped Jesus, but that some of them also doubted. Hardly a group that Jesus might entrust the future of the great commission.

We are reminded in some of our greatest storytelling adventures, it's not the most fit who are asked to complete great things in this world, but the flawed. Hobbits and children, and orphans and paupers. Shepherd boys and refugees. Discarded women and servant girls--and the eleven who wrestled through worship and doubt. Jesus calls us as we are to bring whatever we have and offer it to Him. Like the disciples, we come to Jesus as wounded and broken people. We know we are not whole. We are called forth in our weakness and Jesus simply asks that we come as we are. Jesus is the only perfect one. Christ is our completion, holding all things together.

Many of you know that my husband has been battling pneumonia and whooping cough over the last five weeks. He's been recovering for a few weeks now, but recovery is slow with pneumonia. I've been incredibly careful to stay home as much as possible so I don't

bring anything else home that might put his recovery at risk. Like many of you, we've been living out of vulnerability and caution. We've been mightily aware of our weaknesses. But we are encouraged as we see the church at work here and around the world. And we've been praying more together than we ever have. In our house we are struggling just like you with isolation, with frustrations (we've discovered we aren't very good home-schoolers, but we are getting very good at Yahtzee and baking banana bread), short-temper and feeling lost. But we feel part of God's movement as we work from home and listen to the Spirit.

I don't know how each of you are coming into worship today. We've all been in a stay at home order for five weeks now--and who knows what will happen when this next order ends on April 26. But what I do know is that it's okay to come to Jesus as 11 instead of 12. It's okay to come to worship mixed with doubt. It's okay to come as you are. Let Jesus do the heavy lifting. Bring yourself to Jesus. Bring what you have. Offer yourself as a wounded worshiper and trust Jesus to lift you up.

Reflection 3: The Great Commission gets us moving right where we are.

Jesus' command to his disciples is to go and make more disciples ... in other words, "disciples of Jesus make disciples of Jesus." What we are becoming we are commissioned to give away. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (vs. 19). Theologian Dale Bruner equates the "go!" command with the phrase "get moving" (Bruner, Matthew 2, p. 815). Followers of Jesus will always be a people on the move, will always be a people who move out into the world to give away what has been given to them. The Spirit enlivens us in every way to be and tell good news and then to walk closely and slowly with others to help them follow Jesus. Followers of Jesus move toward other people--whoever they are. The word here is ethne-nations, peoples of the world, it's where we get ethnicity. Our common humanity binds us to all other human beings regardless of race, nationality or creed. As Jesus moved freely toward everyone in His path to show them the heart of the Father, so we too are commissioned to demonstrate the Kingdom of God in every relationship.

The operative word here is "go!", which provides a bit of a conundrum for us today as we have been ordered to "stay!" Stay at home. Don't go. Stop moving. Food for thought. It raises all kinds of questions for us to think about today--awesome questions. And I hope you are deeply engaged by all kinds of questions when it comes to living out the great commission during a pandemic. Here are some of my questions:

How do we go when we've been ordered to stay at home?

Is Staying the New Going?

Does the Gospel Shelter in Place?

Does Zoom count as a disciple-making tool?

Gift-giving and the art of leaving things on someone's porch. Is that part of the great commission?

Can I love my neighbor if I'm wearing a mask?

Does home communion count? And how do I make bread without yeast? (Thank you Cullins family for helping us with that one!)

Did we have to get a noise permit to worship on the roof of the church? Are we even allowed to be on the roof?

If I can't put a check in the offering plate, is it still a tithe?

Is homeschooling considered a spiritual gift? And can I pray for that gift if I don't have it?

And the list goes on. A new context; a new set of questions. How does the gospel get shared in quarantine? In about 10,000 different ways.

And then there are questions that come in the desperate and dark places of this pandemic we are in.

Will God provide for me if I lose my job?

Is Jesus with me, a first responder, a health care worker, or a grocery worker in our community? Is God protecting me in risky places?

In the emergency rooms and the overcrowded waiting rooms where the sick are gathered to seek help and care, is Jesus there?

If I'm not allowed to be in ICU with my loved one, is Jesus there and can He touch them in that desperate place?

Will Jesus heal me if I get sick?

These are heartbreaking questions, questions that touch on suffering and death, questions that come from distressed and anxious hearts. Jesus told his disciples in the upper room (John 14) to not let their hearts be troubled. He told them that He had to go away so He could send the Holy Spirit--the comforter, the advocate, the counselor and the teacher. The Holy Spirit crosses into every place, over every barrier, and brings Jesus everywhere. In His death, Jesus crossed into all the thin places between life and death. There is not a space on earth or in heaven or in between that Jesus has not traveled. By the Holy Spirit He ministers to each person in each place of trouble. Jesus is trustworthy in all places and circumstances. In your space of difficulty and anxiety, call on the name of Jesus for He is closer than you know. I am with you always, He says.

The great commission of Jesus is at work in every context and in every space of our world. The call to be a part of Jesus' work is extended to us right now. We are called to "get moving." Regardless of whether you are considered essential or non-essential at this moment in time, in the Kingdom of God, we are all essential to the mission.

Let's circle back to Cuba. One of the elders at the Presbyterian Church in Cuba writes this about her isolation: "I miss the Sunday services and as you know we cannot worship via internet, it makes more difficult and sad the isolation for me, but we are united in prayer every morning at 9.00. Liudmila rings the bell of the church and people can remember to pray and other people can realize the church is still alive." The church is alive. The Spirit of God enlivens the church. The Spirit of God enlivens our hearts and minds toward creativity as we figure out how to move towards others in even in isolation. How does the gospel go forward in quarantine--10,000 different ways.

Jesus doesn't leave us a simple formula, or "one size fits all" guide to sharing Christ. But He does say that conversion will happen, and the way of Christ can be taught by all of us. And what Jesus does give us is Himself. He holds the world in His hands, and He is with us. In between those two realities, He invites us to climb the tower step by step and to ring the bell of hope with clarity and faithfulness in all of our relationships, and in all the places He calls us to be.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.
So, let's get moving, in Jesus' name!
Amen.

STUDY GUIDE

JESUS • "His Movement Continues"

Matthew 28:10-20

UP: UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Friends, humanity is being rocked right now by needing to physically distance ourselves from one another. For the Christian, we do this out of love for neighbor. Fight hard to distinguish these two realities: physically distancing and relationally separating.

Now is the time to become the greatest artist you have ever been. Create ways to stay relationally and spiritually tethered to your core circle. We need each other. We are gifts to one another! Make phone calls; text photographs; set up video gatherings. Together, we are the hands and feet of Christ to one another and this city!

Begin your study in prayer. Read and reflect on Matthew 28:10-20.

- 1) Verses 11-15 describe yet another attempt to silence Jesus and His movement. In verse 11 we have Roman guards collaborating with Jewish priests. What's all this about? Why are both the secular and the sacred working so hard to silence Jesus?
- 2) Verse 17 lists two responses to seeing the risen Christ. How do you relate to each action?
- 3) Note and discuss the uses of "all," "everything," and "always" in verses 18-20.

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

- 4) Matthew 28:18-20 may be the most quoted text for mission. What excites you the most about this passage?
- 5) What is the greatest challenge for you in joyfully living out Matthew 28:18-20 on a day-to-day basis, especially during COVID-19?

IN: Connect with Each Other

COVID-19: Spend time connecting with your core circle on how you are doing. Pray together.

Pastor Jennifer encourages us to not allow our known limitations to be distractions for us in carrying out the mission of God. Instead, we ought to allow God to work through us just as we are. Pray over one another, that we would joyfully allow God to work through us without delay.