

# “Gathered and Sent”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 28, 2019*

Second Sunday of Easter

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 40:1-10

Matthew 28:16-20

Since January, we have been focusing on the Gospel of Matthew, following the readings prescribed by the Narrative Lectionary; this being the first in a four-year cycle of scriptures, offering a deep dive each year into one of the four gospels. After this four-month journey, we have finally reached the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel, and the appearance of the risen Jesus before his disciples on the mountain in Galilee to his disciples, known as the Great Commission.

At the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, one of two that chronicles the birth of Jesus, an angel appears to Joseph and announces that Mary, his betrothed, would bear a son who is to be named Jesus, Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.” Here, in the very last verse of the gospel, Jesus appears and after giving the disciples marching orders in this Great Commission, he promises them: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So, if nothing else, this gospel has been about incarnation: God taking flesh to be with us; to be one of us; to be at work in us, through us, and among us. Without this final promise, Jesus’ commissioning words would be daunting, even impossible; but all of our efforts as God’s people in the church: seeking to worship and serve; our words, deeds and prayers – flawed and limited even as they are – they are possible only because God has been, is and always will be with us as the living Christ.

I referred to the Great Commission as the church’s marching orders because Jesus is clear in his call that we are meant to go. This is the same voice that said to Abraham, “Go and I will make of you a great nation.” This is the voice that says to Moses, “Go and say to Pharaoh, ‘let my people go.’” This is the same voice that says to the prophet Isaiah, “Go and say to my people...” And now, this voice, the voice of God, says, “Go...and make disciples.”<sup>1</sup>

As always, though, context is important. Matthew makes it clear that, for the disciples who go to meet the risen Jesus, this is a mountaintop experience. They are again in Galilee, their home country, and go to a mountain where Jesus arranged to meet. Mountaintops have been the site for the giving of the Sermon on the Mount and for the feeding of the five-thousand. Jesus was taken up on a mountain during his

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, *Matthew* from Westminster Bible Companion

temptation in the wilderness and ascended often in order to pray. Three of the disciples were chosen to accompany Jesus up a mountain where they saw him transfigured before their eyes; his face shining like the sun. Now the disciples meet Jesus on a mountain again where Jesus will speak new truth to them.

Earlier this week, my son, Jack, and I spent a few days in my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. We had a wonderful time visiting with my mother and enjoyed the beautiful, spring weather. Driving downtown, I found myself driving past Fourth Street on Muhammad Ali Boulevard – formerly Walnut Street – which, while I was high school, had been renamed after the boxing legend and famous humanitarian: one of Louisville’s favorite sons.

In the run-up to the Kentucky Derby, held each first Saturday of May, Louisville puts its best foot forward; the dogwoods and azaleas are in full bloom and lots of people are out walking the streets. Although the name of the street has changed, it may have looked much like it did in 1958 when Thomas Merton, the famed Trappist monk, had what he recalls as being a spiritual experience, which he describes this way:

*In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers...This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud...I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize that we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.<sup>2</sup>*

It may be surprising to hear that when the disciples encounter Jesus on the mountain, we are told that they worshipped him, but some of them doubted. Why did some of them doubt? What were they doubting? The text doesn’t tell us. It could be that some of the disciples were still wondering if this really was Jesus. After such an amazing turn of events over the past days, seeing their friend arrested and tortured and crucified, it was too much for some of them to think that this really was Jesus. And yet, the text says, they worshipped him. Everyone worshipped, but some doubted. Can faith and doubt exist at the same time?<sup>3</sup>

There apparently were some among the disciples wondering if what they are seeing is real. But as we read the charge Jesus gives the disciples to go and make

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, from *Conjectures of an Innocent Bystander*

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Sanders, “Some Doubted”

disciples of all nations, he does not say, *only those who have never doubted*. Jesus commissions all of the disciples, even the doubters. All are called to teach the faith to people, to create Christian communities, to form people who would become Christ-followers and baptize people; even when they aren't certain.

The word used for *doubt* here means to waver, to waffle, to be unsure which way to go. In John's gospel, when Thomas doubts, it is not this word, but one that means *unbelief*. For Matthew, doubt is not so much intellectual questioning as it is waffling behavior, not being certain which direction to go.<sup>4</sup>

Doubt is not the opposite of faith in Matthew, but an inevitable part of the Christian life of faith and discipleship. When Peter walks on water, for example, he become frightened when he notices the strong wind and begins to sink. After saving him from drowning, Jesus says to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Peter's doubt does not prevent Jesus from saving him, nor does it preclude Peter from being recognized as a leader among the disciples, or even being the "rock" upon which Jesus will build his church. So also the doubt of some disciples at the end of Matthew does not preclude them from being entrusted with the ongoing work of Jesus' mission. All of the disciples receive the same commission.<sup>5</sup>

The Great Commission is first and foremost a promise that because of God's great love for us, Christ will always be present in our midst. Whether we worship or doubt, whether we are joyful or fearful, whether it is with devotion or dread that we seek to follow Jesus' words, we are called to go and make disciples of all nations, to build up the church, to share the message that God loves us and is with us always. A disciple is, of course, a student, and the task before the church is helping others become students of God's will.

And so, on this day when we receive new members to formally join in the work and worship of this congregation, we are reminded that each of us is a disciple, a student of God's will and way. Not all of us are called to literally go to some different location, but each of us must in some way leave the mountaintop. We gather as the church in order to be sent into the world. Some are called to evangelize or to teach or to baptize, but in some way, all of us are meant to share with the world the revelation that Thomas Merton experienced the spring day at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville: that we are all God's children; each of us desire and deserve to know that we are created and loved by God, and that Jesus, Emmanuel, is with us always. In some way, each of us is called, no matter how we might waver or waffle, to go and share this message: to love our neighbors – who shine like the sun – in the same way that God loves us. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Marcia Auld Glass, "Great Commission"

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*