

Last Sunday was Easter Sunday and today we're still celebrating Easter because Easter isn't just one day, it is a season in the church that lasts for 50 days leading up to Pentecost. There are seven post-resurrection stories in the Bible: last week we talked about one of them: the road to Emmaus. And today's gospel story is the only post-resurrection story in Matthew. Matthew goes straight from the angels appearing to the women at the empty tomb on Easter morning to today's story known as the Great Commission. Notice there is no physical description of the risen Lord. "There is no portrayal of radiant glory or awesome power. The focus is on the words of Jesus" (Elisabeth Johnson, workingpreacher.org). In the final and shortest section of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples meet once again in Galilee, where they started their ministry together. They meet on a mountain, a place where revelation is expected. This time, the risen Christ, meets and commissions them, equipping them to share the good news with others. You see resurrection leads to commissioning. "For Jesus' resurrection is not the end of his mission, but rather inaugurates a fuller realization of it. For Jesus' disciples, this means that, as much as they failed Jesus during his passion, their call to follow him is now renewed and expanded" (Ruthanna B. Hooke, workingpreacher.org). Before we turn to God's Word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I've shared this before with you all but whenever I used to hear "good news" I would get stuck because it reminded me of evangelism, and I didn't like the "E" word. Growing up here in SC, I used to think that evangelism was about "cramming religion down people's throats." Evangelism, to me, was **MANIPULATIVE!** I remember being at Clemson University as a campus ministry intern and being handed tracts at a ballgame. The title? "Ten Reasons You are

Going to Hell.” I remember reading a billboard on 85 that stated, “Get right or Get left. Jesus is the answer.” I didn’t want to be any part of that kind of evangelism. AND to top it off... I grew up 30 minutes from Heritage USA- for those of you who can’t remember that- it was home to the televangelists, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker at PTL Ministries. I was afraid and embarrassed to be associated with “those” kinds of Christians. Still today when I hear the word “evangelism,” I often feel as if it has been hijacked, not only by fear but by believers offering simplistic versions of the gospel, false promises of prosperity and happiness, and the exploitive use of clever marketing and communication methods to “bring home converts” or “win souls for Christ.” Don’t mishear me. I am not making fun of those for whom this is how they came to faith. What I’m saying is that evangelizing should not be about religiously conquering or manipulating other people as much as it is sharing the good news- how God through Christ has been at work in our lives.

As God would have it, my first graded sermon over 25 years ago was on this very text. It was an eye opening time for me because after encountering Jesus’ words, my cynicism slowly began to retreat. I realized that in order to preach authentically, I really had to wrestle with reclaiming what evangelism meant to me and what it looked like. I soon adopted my church’s definition of evangelism as “joyfully sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world.” Evangelism also had to become something I was no longer embarrassed of- though I knew I would be associated with others who would tell me that because of my gender and my calling to preach that the Bible says otherwise. Yet, God’s Spirit was leading, and I sometimes reluctantly chose to follow. “GO.” “MAKE.” “BAPTIZE.” “TEACH.”-

Four powerful verbs are found in today's text. Only one of them is an imperative verb. A command. MAKE disciples. And three other important verbs support this central task of making disciples: go, baptize, and teach. They're the how of making disciples. BUT... what does it mean to make disciples?

Jesus commissions all eleven disciples- eleven because of Judas's death. Notice that even the doubts of some of the disciples does not preclude them from being entrusted with the ongoing work of Jesus' mission. Jesus commissions them all to MAKE DISCIPLES- not only in Galilee or Jerusalem- but in the whole world. Jesus gives them a vocation- a calling as disciples. Jesus is also- for the first time in Matthew's gospel- passing along the teaching duties to them. Before today's ending story in Matthew only Jesus taught. One can't come to know Christ- become a disciple- nor continue to grow in their faith without going, baptizing and teaching. The command is to "make disciples," not just "preach the gospel." This implies ongoing work and ministry among those with whom the gospel is preached. Maybe making disciples means to try and share and live what Jesus taught? Maybe it means to share our faith story with others? You might be asking...what good is MY story going to do? Or I don't know much about God, and I surely don't have all the answers. We don't need to know all the answers. We can tell our story of the difference our believing in Jesus Christ has made in our own lives.

One scholar says that "the basic issue of evangelism is whether or not we believe that we have any good news to share with the world" (Tom Gillespie). He continues to say that he is not talking about imposing our belief on others. He is

simply asking whether or not we believe that we have any good news to share with those who for whatever reason stand outside the faith we claim to embrace. When I lived in Seattle, I was in a whole new world. Being from the south, I was asked to repeat myself regularly in the coffee shop. I served a church that worshiped in a movie theater. I often wore a cross necklace given to me by my grandmother. Truth be told, I forgot I had it on sometimes. One day I was in the gym working out and a guy approached me, pointed to the cross around my neck, and asked, "Hey...is does that Jesus dude?" Shocked. I wondered if this guy was hitting on me. I didn't know how to respond. Was this guy from this planet? Had he no clue who Jesus was?! Come to find out...he didn't. It was me who didn't know what to say. Assumptions can get us into trouble. Evangelism involves two things: 1) saying in word and action the good news of God's grace demonstrated and promised in Jesus Christ and 2) an invitation to respond to God's grace by confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and committing one's life to him as a Christian and a member of the Christian community (Shirlie Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*). Some of us, by and large, are simply not accustomed to talking out loud about our faith. Not even in the church. For the disciples in today's story, faith and certainty are not synonymous. "Even at the feet of the risen Jesus, faithfulness is obedience to Jesus even in the midst of doubt. Even though some are unsure, they still come 'to the mountain where Jesus directed'" (Eric Barreto, workingpreacher.org). The foundation or grounds upon which Jesus builds the Great Commission are found in vs. 18. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." "That is, the lingering result of the cross and resurrection is Jesus' ultimate power and authority over all things" (Barreto). Notice how many alls are used in this text. Jesus has authority over all the alls on earth and in

heaven. “It is precisely because of Jesus’ authority that the disciples can be called on this mission. The confidence, the surety that Jesus reigns supreme is all we need in order to follow the path Jesus lays before us.

Before we go, make, baptize and teach, let me be clear. “Making converts is not the goal of this commission per se. Making new disciples by teaching them to live according to Jesus’ commands, such as those in the Sermon on the Mount that forbid violence or retribution, and that are summed up in the command to love neighbor as oneself” (Hooke) is the goal. Share with others what Jesus taught that you try to live by. These commands are “taught not only in words but by deeds of Jesus’ disciples, who convey Jesus’ commands by living them” (Hooke). When I served as a chaplain in a psychiatric hospital and drug and alcohol rehab facility outside of Atlanta, I learned many things and grew in my faith. I led weekly spirituality groups where CEOs of large companies were detoxing from their drug of choice and refused to sit in a group with full blown paranoid schizophrenics because they thought they had nothing to learn. My supervisor confronted me one day with a haunting question. He asked, “If you don’t ask these folks about God, then who will?” I will never forget that question and the huge impact it had on me and my own faith and call to make disciples not only a chaplain but also as a follower of Christ.

What has Jesus done for you? Where have you experienced him at work in your life? Who have you told about it? I must admit this journey of joyfully sharing the good news of Jesus with the world still leaves me with questions- should I approach this person or share this particular story or comment on such a hard

topic as a pastor who may view things differently from that person? But then I'm reminded over and over again that sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is never about me (though I sometimes still fret over it- did I say the right thing? Should I have said something to or prayed with that person in that moment?). Making disciples is always about God and whose heart God is opening to listen to God's Word. In today's gospel story we're reminded that we're to tell others of Jesus and his authority. We are to share what God has done in Jesus and what God will continue to do in Jesus. Whose religion is Christianity? It is Christ's. Christ is Lord and has all authority. The lordship of Jesus is not that of armies and force but is the authority of the crucified one. We, as imperfect disciples, are sent to share this good news. You don't have to travel to Africa or any other continent or country, you can make disciples right here! What I love most about this text is the reminder that we don't have to have all the answers. We can even bring our doubts. We don't have to have it all together. Who knows? Maybe our doubts will allow space for people to come to know Jesus more? We can show up as we are and trust that as we help to make disciples, we aren't alone on this journey. Jesus has promised to be with us- always 'til the end of the age. "Jesus wields authority and because of that authority we can make disciples wherever we might go, for Jesus will always meet us there. And if Jesus will meet us there, then our call to the world is a call to listen as much as it is to speak. The making of disciples, baptism, and teaching are not lectures or speeches; they are relational acts that bring together all the nations under God's grace" (Barreto). Let's share Christ's forgiveness and hope and transforming power to a world that does not know him or follow him. I don't know about y'all but that's good news worth sharing, indeed! Thanks be to God! Amen.