

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, '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.'

Being Christ's Presence

I take comfort in Matthew's story of the Ascension precisely because *there is no Ascension*. If I asked you, "What happened after Jesus told his disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations?" many would answer, "He ascended into heaven." But Matthew's gospel ends right here; there is no chapter 29 where Jesus rises into the sky and promises to return later. Jesus just stays where he is. So if you're confused about where Jesus went when he rose into heaven, and what this Holy Spirit is that comes down a week later like a rushing wind and tongues of fire, stick to Matthew. You don't have to think about it. Matthew ends his gospel with Jesus telling us, "I am with you always, to the end of the age, AMEN."

And that brings me great comfort, especially when I find myself in danger, and we all do find ourselves in danger, in either of two ways:

1. We find ourselves PHYSICALLY in danger
2. Or we find ourselves SPIRITUALLY in danger

When we are under threat of being killed, or injured, or disabled, we are physically in danger. When a young man is sent to war, it doesn't matter how brave you are; it's unsettling. Even training for the military can be very unsettling. I remember basic training, and going through some of that training – throwing hand grenades, crawling under barbed wire while bullets are flying over your head, I feel physically threatened, and that makes me a bit anxious. Another time we may feel physically in danger is when we have those close calls on the road; when you see that oncoming car drifting over the solid line and into your lane the hair on the back of your head stands up, and you feel in danger. It is at those times that we may be prone to say a quick prayer asking Jesus to deliver us from the oncoming vehicle. The danger reminds us of Jesus' presence.

The other danger that we often find ourselves in is SPIRITUAL danger, and that danger involves sin, like the sin of not doing your homework when you know that you could have done it, and the next day in class the first thing your teacher says is "pass your homework forward" or if you haven't studied and she says, "close your book and take

out a pencil and a sheet of paper.” That’s right: pop quiz time. And you know that you’re unprepared. That’s when you pray that the questions she chooses to ask will be the ones that you know the answers to. And as we grow older the spiritual danger presents itself in different ways. Like when you get your first speeding ticket – going 60 in a 30 mile per hour zone, and you know you’ll have to tell our mom and dad because they pay the insurance. I’m sure you all have stories from your teenage years. Then we grow into adulthood and we still find ourselves in spiritual danger. Maybe we get fired from a job for poor performance. Maybe we get dropped by our significant other for failing to show enough consideration, for taking them for granted.

And it’s interesting that a spiritual crisis becomes a crisis for us only after our sins are exposed. We won’t do our homework forever if we never suffer consequences for not doing it. We will slack off on the job as long as don’t get reprimanded for it. We will continue to take relationships for granted until someone says, “I’m leaving you.” That’s the way it was in the Bible as well. Prophets kept on telling people, “You’re breaking God’s laws. You’re stealing from the poor. You’re neglecting the widows and the orphans. You’re not welcoming the stranger.” But the people kept on sinning until the nation of Israel fell to foreign invaders. And then everybody would say, “Oh, we should have listened to the prophets; we should have obeyed God.” It just goes to show us that the spiritual crisis is actually the sin itself, and the consequences are in fact a good thing because they prompt us to stop sinning.

But the consequences for our sin can be devastating, because people in this world can be very unforgiving. People in this world have limits to their patience, so when that crisis with your spouse comes, and he or she leaves you, you can feel very much alone. Friends can become enemies, and you can find yourself isolated. The consequences for our sin are far more devastating than the consequences of a serious accident, because an accident may leave you disabled, but there is no worse feeling than being totally alone and rejected. Think of how many people take their own lives when someone they love leaves them. All you see is darkness – like what Bill Withers said, “Aint no sunshine when she’s gone.”

But when you feel that lonely, when you feel that abandoned, when you feel that despair, IT IS SURE IS GOOD TO KNOW JESUS. It’s good to know that he remains with you always, even to the end of the earth, and to know that there is no sin beyond his forgiveness, and that you will never be beyond the reach of his love. When the consequences of sin leaves you in a wilderness, you will find Jesus there. THAT WAS HIS PROMISE: I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS. And it’s more than a few people who have found Jesus in just such a wilderness.

But what of those who don't know Jesus? What of those who don't know of God's unconditional love, of his superhuman forgiveness and mercy, forgiveness and mercy that the world can't offer? My friends, there are more and more people out there who have no idea who Jesus is, and they are enslaved to sin of various sorts that is sure to have devastating consequences for them, and when their world falls apart, who will save them? Who will save them from the self-recrimination, the guilt, the shame, and the loneliness of rejection? People who are never introduced to Jesus will never see any light beyond their darkness, and for many that darkness will overtake them. They will swallow some pill or shoot something into their veins or just drink until they can't feel anything, and they will drown in that darkness unless someone shows them that there is a light beyond that darkness.

That's why Jesus tells his disciples to GO. Don't stay up on that mountain bowing down and worshiping him. If you love him, GO and let people know about him, but most importantly MAKE DISCIPLES. It's good to tell people about Jesus, but actions are more important than words, and disciples are people who DO what their master teaches them to do. Do as Jesus did: TEACH, HEAL, PRAY, ENCOURAGE. Thirty years ago it was a popular thing to say, "What would Jesus do?" I think it's a good principle to live by; before you say something or do something foolish or damaging or discouraging or boastful or rude, ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?" or "What would Jesus say?"

The Church today is very divided, and the biggest reason of that has to do with doctrine and interpretation of scripture. Churches can't agree on what exactly happens when the priest blesses the bread and the wine during holy communion. They can't agree on the status of the Virgin Mary or whether we have the freedom to determine our own salvation. And the world watches and scratches its head, and says, "I don't know about this Church thing. It's all too confusing." And the division in the Church has its emphasis on doctrine have not only driven people away from church; it has also served to further enslave people to their sin...because if I don't like what THIS pastor and THIS church believe about this behavior I can go always find another church that will tell me it's okay to do what I'm doing, to believe what I believe. And so churches spend an inordinate amount of time arguing with each other over doctrine while Satan is laughing.

But what if we just did what Jesus told us to do; go and make disciples. Go and show people how to forgive, and how to help others, and how to advocate for those who are on the margins, and how to welcome those who feel unwelcomed, and HOW TO LOVE THE WAY GOD LOVES?

My sisters and brothers; we must be disciples of Jesus who make disciples FOR Jesus. THAT IS WHAT JESUS MEANS WHEN HE PROMISES TO BE WITH US TO THE END OF TIME. He may be standing on a mountain somewhere in Galilee for all we know, but he told us

to GO from there, and to BE JESUS to the lost and lonely in this world, and that is what we must do. WE MUST BE JESUS TO ONE ANOTHER so that people will KNOW JESUS. IT STARTS HERE – IT STARTS IN THE WAY WE INTERACT WITH ONE ANOTHER. We can do so in ways that can wound and hurt, or we can do it in ways that heal and affirm. We can be disciples of Christ, or we can give the devil something else to laugh at. Let us be Jesus to one another, so that others will know that he is with us always, even to the end of the age.