

Matthew 28:1-29

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, 'You must say, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

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.'

"The Gospel of Matthew: Christ Has Risen. We Can Prove It"

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We know that confession is good for the soul. It's also bad for the reputation. Robert Fulghum confessed, in his book *Second Thoughts from a Secret Life*, in that book he confesses to his family that "I used to wok pot to change the oil on the car. I used the kitchen sink sponge to clean my shoes. I deliberately left price tags on presents, and sometimes even raised the price. And on Christmas, your mother and I were Santa Claus, but I was always the Easter Bunny." I have some confessions as well. You may remember that day the district superintendent came, and I said it was good to have him with us? I didn't think it was. And if you ever have to make an announcement and you get the microphone there, and I tell you how many minutes you have, I always think you'll take a minute more, but you won't know that.

Now, what I'm about to say, you have to understand in the context. I was in college in the Sixties, and seminary in the late Sixties. I grew up not trusting institutions. So you've got to understand that. I know that lots of you had the same sort of thing - "Don't trust

anybody over 30, and don't trust institutions." I confess that I got into ministry to kill the church. At 8:00, there was a unison gasp. I believed that the church was irrelevant and needed to die. Or dying, and somebody needed to finish it. Now, back in the Sixties, *Time* magazine ran this article, front page, "God is Dead." The first lecture I heard at Duke, James Pike, bishop of the Episcopal Church, he said, "Proof of the decline of the church is the quality of students Duke accepted into their divinity school." I was one of them. "And the church as it is," he's in the chapel saying this, I'm sitting on the floor, there were so many people. "And the church as it is will be gone in three years." I would graduate and be ordained to a non-existent church. I got into ministry to kill the church. I did.

Anybody with that kind of approach had better take into account some of the things in the Bible, and especially the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is the only Gospel that speaks of the church. Matthew sees Jesus as the new Moses. Moses brought Israel out of bondage, Jesus brought the church. Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from the mountain, Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount brought the Beatitudes. Moses talked about the people of God, and in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, which is the church, for Matthew. Matthew was a teacher. In the birth story in Matthew's Gospel, the Christ child was visited by magi, kings from the East, astrologers. His birth was a cosmic event. In Matthew, God sends angels to communicate.

Have you looked at the front of the bulletin? It's from the Book of Kells, Dublin, Ireland, written in the 8th century, that's the cover on the Gospel of Matthew. It's an angel. Matthew speaks through angels. Luke speaks through dreams. Matthew is the only Gospel that mentions the church and I got into the church to kill it, so I have to answer to Matthew, and to the Jesus of Matthew. The church, Matthew said, the church is of God and will prevail against the gates of Hell. Matthew wrote, "Peter, upon this rock, Jesus said, I will build my church." The church. Matthew believed Jesus called the church into being.

What about the church? We see some things happening in the church that are rather odd, don't you think? I mean, a few years ago, Trinity United Methodist Church, downtown Denver, Jim Barnes the senior pastor told the congregation, if a thousand people would come the second Sunday of September to worship, he would ride a horse to church. They did. He did. And the *Denver Post* covered it. The first year the Broncos were in the Super Bowl, Reverend Richard Gilbert, Cheyenne, Wyoming, First United Methodist Church, put on his robe for worship and an ecclesiastical stole that was orange with the logo of the Broncos, and the *Denver Post* got wind of it and took a picture of Reverend Gilbert and it was on the front page of the *Denver Post*. You see, the church is sometimes odd.

Announcements in church bulletins tell us more than they know, sometimes, like, "The Outreach Committee will be making calls on people who are not afflicted with any church." I think they meant "affiliated," I'm not sure. "The songfest will be held at the Methodist Church this Wednesday." I think they meant "held." "Don't let worry kill you, let the church help," was one announcement. "The early service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What is Hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice." Surely, it wasn't our

choir. "There will be a bean supper held this Thursday evening in the church basement. Music will follow." Now, let's just move on....

When I was an associate pastor in the church in Denver, Christ Church, I was asked to organize an Ash Wednesday service. I thought it would be a good idea for the people who would come to the service, the beginning of Lent, if they would write their most egregious sins on a card, and I had this hibachi pot where they could take it up, a little fire, and they could put their cards on the fire, which I did, and so did they. We even had extra cards in the pew racks, which they apparently needed, because when they brought all their cards up, it created such a plume of smoke that it set off the smoke detectors and three people with respiratory problems ran for the door, and all the cards fell down onto the fire and put it out, and I was never asked again to do the Ash Wednesday service at Christ Church on the corner of Colorado Boulevard and Seventh.

I have seen the church at its worst. In North Carolina, one of the churches I was appointed to, they said, "Don't bring any African Americans to this church." Of course I did. Neil Sykes came. In West Virginia, at my home church, the senior pastor was removed because he took a stand on the war in Vietnam. In Boulder, a young man who grew up in this church, his name was Jim Llewelyn, lots of you know his family, was removed from ministry at St. Paul's United Methodist Church because of articles he wrote in the local paper. I guess you can't have an opinion, and you can't get it printed, because they assume that if you said it, and you're the minister of the church, then it must be the whole church agrees. Currently our denomination seems to be obsessed with a church growth mentality, and that is going to require me, according to an email from our bishop, to post weekly statistics, long-range projections as to what our growth will be, numerically. It's quantities, not qualities. And I'm not happy about that. And Matthew said the church is of God, the kingdom of God. If the church is of God, then let it act like it.

Nicholas Berdyaev got a glimpse of what the church could be when he wrote, "It is in the church that grass grows and flowers blossom, for the church is nothing less than the cosmos Christianized." If the church is of God, then let it become a vision of the world as it can be. If the church is of God, then let it be a place where we can share our ideas and confront our biases and confess our sins. If the church is of God, then let it be a voice of hope that shouts down the mocking drone of despair that exists today. If the church is of God, then let our pulpits be free and let our doors be open and let our minds travel to places and thoughts where we've never been. And let our hearts scribe circles of love that expand to the unloved, and the unlovable. If the church is of God, then let our message go out that debate is good but name-calling isn't. That disagreement is possible in the context of being agreeable. If the church is of God, then let us raise our sights.

Antonio once wrote, "If we don't raise our eyes, we will think we are the highest point." We're not. The true church, the one of which Jesus spoke, is never satisfied with itself, always striving to grow in depth and spirit. Never content with its place in the world until the world is civil and children are safe and wealth is defined in qualities of living, not quantities of material goods. The true church.

Members of the church, secondly. The true church, members of the church, the one of which Jesus spoke, is filled with members who have joined who know they are disciples of Jesus, not fans of Jesus, not admirers of Jesus, but disciples of Jesus, and there's a difference. In the true church, what people do in the church, how people live because of the church. You could get the impression, if you read a few things,... Matthew gave us the Beatitudes, and Jesus said on the mountain, "Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who suffer for what is right." Sounds passive, comforting. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven." So peaceful. So calming. Blessed are we, and we will be rewarded.

Abuna Shakur, an Aramaic scholar, translated the Beatitudes from the Aramaic language, and this is what you would find if you did. "And Jesus said," according to him, "Get up, you who are poor in spirit. Get up, you who mourn. Get up, you who are meek. Get up, you who are pure in heart. Get up, you who are peacemakers. Get up, you who hunger and thirst for what is right." That's not passive. That's active. That's Aramaic. That's the language Jesus spoke. I think that's what Jesus said. I think that's what we're called to do. Get up.

A young man enlisted, 82nd Airborne, was assigned to jump school, asked the recruiter, "What happens in jump school?" Was told, "It will last three weeks. First week, they separate the men from the boys. Second week, they separate the men from the fools. Third week, the fools jump." That's who we are, sometimes, fools who jump. Fools who think the world has its values wrong, and we get up to try to make them right. Fools who dare to be different, when everybody else is the same. Fools who know what it is to live, rather than just exist, and who believe that we are called to act, rather than invited to join the group that wants to sit and do nothing. Jesus said it in the Sermon on the Mount - "Get up." I think that's what he said. If he didn't say it there, then he said it at the pool of Bethesda. "Get up and walk." And he said it at the Last Supper, when he handed them the towel, and he said, "Serve." At the temple, talking to the philosophers, when he was 12 years old - "Get up and think." At the trial when he was accused - "Get up and be fair." At the empty tomb, when they thought he was dead - "Get up and look." At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, when he gave them the great commission - "Get up and teach and baptize in my name." He said, "Get up, get going, get moving."

Like this church, frankly. This church that built a Habitat house, that project started the week of the recession in 2008, and they said we shouldn't do it. They said we couldn't do it. Well, we did it. Or our young people, in this church, who spend a part of their summer vacation in beautiful Lawrence, Kansas, where the heat was 105. Like this church, who approved the statement that's put on the front of your bulletin, you may not have noticed it, we approved it. "It is our vision to live a religion as loving and considerate of persons as Jesus, as devoted to justice as Old Testament prophets, as responsive to truth as science, as beautiful as art, as intimate as the home, and as indispensable as the air we breathe." Get up, get going, disciples of Jesus. Look at the world as a stage upon which

the drama of faith is played. Look at human need as the imperative to meet it. Look at giving as something that is done by the grace of God, since giving is really giving back, and reaching out is truly paying it forward. Look at life as a spark, at time as brief, and problems as challenges, and tomorrow as prelude. And each of us a piece of the truth, but all of us together can formulate the whole of it, if we talk to each other. The true church. The one of which Matthew wrote, the one of which Jesus spoke. Members are not numbers on a list, but disciples with a mission.

Finally, the true church, the one of which Matthew wrote, the one of which Jesus spoke, it will prevail, because of what the members believe. Disciples. The rumor that the body of Jesus was stolen by his friends, and that the resurrection was a farce, was being told. Matthew wrote this Gospel, and one of the reasons the Gospel was written was to refute that rumor. The disciples did not steal Jesus' body. Christ is alive. But what do we believe? Some of us have had trouble with miracle stories. The Sunday School teacher read a passage from the Old Testament book of Jonah, and how God appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and how Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, and Jonah prayed to the Lord from the belly of the fish, saying "I call out to you, O Lord, from my distress, and the Lord answered me," and the Lord spoke to the fish, and the fish vomited out Jonah onto dry land, and the teacher looked at the children and said, "What do you get out of that story? We just read the story of Jonah. What does that mean to you?" A little boy named Mark, a ten-year-old, stood up and said, "That story tells us you can't keep a good man down." I don't understand that story any better than that. But there is a meaning of that story that seems very clear. God wants us to go where we'd rather not, to speak when we'd like to be quiet, because God is concerned about our enemies, the Ninevites, as God is concerned about our friends.

What do disciples believe? What disciples believe... some of us have trouble with the virgin birth story. We're just not sure how Jesus turned water into wine. Others of us look at the story of Moses parting the Red Sea in Exodus, as they were leaving Egypt, as fiction. Did Jesus really heal the sick? Can a prophet call the sun to stand still? Did God create the world? Is evolution right? There's a story about the wife of an Anglican bishop who learned that Charles Darwin was suggesting that we descended from apes and she said, "I hope that is not true, but if it is, then I hope it does not become widely known." What do we believe? Alfred North Whitehead said that the power of God is the worship God inspires, and the worship of God is not a rule of safety, it is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable. Even Oprah Winfrey has a touch of it when she said, "There's no such thing as a fluke. Lots of things I'm not clear about, the universe, God, afterlife, all that stuff, but one thing I'm positively clear upon is this. There is not such thing as a fluke. There is a rhythm and a pattern to the universe that is grander and more magnificent than my brain can comprehend, but it all works together."

So, what do disciples believe? We believe that coincidence is another name for God. We believe that Revelation isn't just a book at the end of the Bible. We believe we don't have to accept the Bible as factually true to be able to pick it up as a book that is incredible truth. We believe sometimes we have to suspend reason, in order to rise to a higher logic. We believe in mystery and music and the meaning of every myth. We believe that a new

idea that is a great idea is an inspiration that comes to us beyond our knowing. And we believe that the darkest night is just prelude to the most amazing dawn. And we believe that we hear God loudest when we are most lonely, because God can fill us best when we know ourselves to be empty. And that a miracle is no big deal, because they happen all the time, it's just often we're looking the other way. That being born again is the start of a journey, that God does not intend for us to be infants in the faith but the time to grow up, and to keep on growing. We believe that birth is a passage, but it's followed by other passages, including death, that death is a part of it, not an exception to it, and nothing to be feared. And that disciples didn't steal the body of Jesus, and Christ is alive. Otherwise, we wouldn't be talking about him still.

I was called by God to kill the church. Some of you were perhaps, as well, or at least maintain a healthy sort of suspicion about institutions like these. And the question remains - why? Why would God call some of us to kill the church when Jesus said the church is of God, and it will prevail against the gates of Hell? And the whole theme of Matthew's Gospel points to the kingdom of God, which is the church. See, I think we are called by God to kill the church because God knows we can't do it. We can't kill the true church, where the disciples, all of us, get up and go and do God's work. Or where disciples use logic and then lose logic sometimes, when faced with the mysteries and the magic of life. We can't kill the church, but what we can do is challenge it, and that's what God has called us to do. That is precisely what we're doing. Challenge the church to be what God needs it to be.