

## **“Marching Orders”**

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Matt 28:16-20

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In the lectionary, today is designated as Trinity Sunday. If your bible has various headings as mine does, today’s scripture, however, falls under the heading of “The Great Commission.” My goal today is to show how these two seemingly different headings are closely connected.

At this point in the scripture, the chief priests have hatched a plot to discount the resurrection. They need a logical explanation that prevents this crazy notion from getting out of hand. This is especially true of those officials who were of the Sadducees, because they did not believe in life hereafter for ANYONE, much less for the Son of God. So, they told the soldiers to say that the disciples had come in the night and taken the body and they paid the soldiers well for upholding this version of the story. The bible tells us that this falsehood persisted over time.

There is one flaw in this story. If the disciples came and took the body, what were the soldiers doing? Sleeping? In their trumped up story, they were actually admitting to negligence on their part and nothing happened to them that we know of. There is either more to that story, such as assurances for the soldiers, or perhaps these soldiers were not very smart. Nevertheless, rather than give the mystery of a missing body a more thorough investigation, the chief priests believed a lie would be easier and more effective. The fact is, they could not explain it. The fact that no

soldiers were punished should have caught the attention of someone. I wonder if anyone really asked.

By now, Judas is dead and the remaining disciples are going to Galilee as they had been instructed. This message of instruction has its own little drama. Who had told them to go to Galilee? Jesus? A spirit? No, it was the women who told them. I hope you grasp the significance of this moment in that prevailing culture; the women told them and they responded. The women had the message loud and clear because both the angel and the risen Lord had told them the same thing – Go to Galilee. Not just the other side of town, but Galilee. That's more than a casual stroll; it's a couple of days walk, at least!

Everything is changed, everything is a blur. The tomb is empty, people are talking about having seen Jesus, and they have instructions to go to a mountain in Galilee. I'm sure their heads were all in a spin.

I want you to get a real sense of how these disciples must have felt. Let's think of a modern day example of such a day. Let's suppose you are moving to another town to a different job. The moving van has arrived, the driver is showing you documents to sign, and someone tells you the real estate agent is on the phone with some worrisome news. Neighbors are stopping by to say farewell, your teenager is concerned about the new school and strange neighborhood and your spouse comes around the corner to tell you that the car won't start. Would your head be in a spin? So, picture the disciples in that sort of mindset, except even more so.

The mountain mentioned in our scripture is not named, but we have words that tell us Jesus had been specific as to which mountain they were to go to.

So, let's picture this band of people, trudging along the road headed north to Galilee. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century way of thinking, we see a group of folks, all with the same thought, all with the same belief, the same hope. But, the bible tells us otherwise and it makes sense. Some of the eleven are just

following the crowd because they don't know what else to do. As a group, they may have had something in common with each other, but they were still a bunch of individuals with their own thoughts. There were probably some who were completely convinced of the resurrection. There were probably some who thought, "What are we doing?" Others might be thinking, "I'm not sure of anything anymore, so I'm just going to tag along. But in simple terms, the scripture tells us that some of them still doubted. I'm sure their doubt left them troubled. The resurrection was still an event beyond their wildest imagination and that logical part of their brains was still telling them it didn't make sense; it couldn't have happened. But, let's not forget what a powerful motivator doubt can be. To say they just didn't understand would be a valid statement, but clarity was just around the corner.

Let's think back to stories of Jesus' healing miracles. So often, what did he tell a healed person when the deed was done? He would tell them to go and tell no one. It's been called the messianic secret. It's along the same line as when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. He told his mother, "My time has not come yet." There is a plausible explanation offered by some for this behavior. Jesus did not want to be known simply as a miracle man, or just as a healer of the sick. There was more to the story and Jesus knew it would take time for the whole plot, the entire meaning, to unfold. Even when asked about his kingdom during Pilate's interrogation, he was ambiguous. Never in the time before the crucifixion did he make a thundering, public announcement as to who he was. Do you ever wonder why he waited? What determination and patience it must have taken to wait until the time was right. Jesus has been described as a man of strong emotional intelligence. His own self-awareness allowed him to see and understand the limitations of those around him.

Remember the Tom Cruise movie, *A Few Good Men*?" He had the marine colonel on the stand and said, "I want the truth!" To which the colonel replied, "You can't handle the truth!" That's probably how Jesus saw his followers; unable to comprehend, not yet, at least.

So, why is this bit of background important? We need to bear it in mind when we read in today's scripture that Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me." There you have it. There is the thundering announcement that humanity had been waiting for. Jesus has finally proclaimed who he was and still is. There is nothing to add to this. His announcement covers everything.

And so, with that authority, he gives us our marching orders. These orders can be broken down into three segments that have great overlap. They are GO, BAPTIZE, and TEACH.

First, we are told to go. Go where? I submit to you that we are to go wherever the good news needs to be told. But one thing is for sure, 'go' means outside of these walls. Some scholars say the original language could be translated to mean, "as you go," meaning along your normal coming and going in your daily life. For most, that kind of coming and going is limited to the home front. For others, it includes the call to far-off places. Remember back in chapter 10 of Matthew when Jesus first sent the disciples out, two by two? We're going to talk about that next week. He told them to take the message to the Jews only. He said, "Do not go among the Gentiles or any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." More about that next week.

That was then and now he says take the message to the whole world. To all nations, it says, meaning all peoples.

Secondly, we are to baptize. The significance here is not just the ceremony of baptism. How does Jesus tell us to baptize? He says to do so in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Compare this to the baptism of John. What did John ask of people when they were baptized? He asked that they repent. John's baptism was one of repentance. Now Jesus talks about baptism in the name of the trinity, although he doesn't call it that. Baptism in the name of the trinity is repentance, yes, but it is so much more. It is belief, recognizing our sin, acceptance of God's grace, and embracing our willingness to follow and obey.

What if we decided to baptize only in the name of the Father? This would deny the very work and person of Jesus and the ongoing renewal we experience from the Spirit. The Father would remain a mystical deity, detached and appearing as uncaring.

What if we baptized only in the name of Jesus? This would overlook the ultimate creator, the Father, the part of God that is larger than we can understand or reason. It would miss the ever present comfort of the Spirit.

And what if we baptized only in the name of the Spirit? What is missing there is the awesome power of the Father and the redemptive love of Christ.

To separate God into any one of these three parts, to the exclusion of the other two is to miss the fact that the trinity is inseparable, indivisible. The God over us is the Father/Creator, the incarnate Word in Jesus and the Holy Spirit comforter. And one important fact is this: the three persons of the Trinity NEVER work in conflict with each other. They always carry the same message, perhaps conveyed in three different manners of speaking, but always the same message.

By another example, if I love my earthly father only because of his checkbook, or only because of the roof over my head, I miss the whole point of loving him at all.

But, make sure of this; the words, 'Father, Son, and Holy Ghost' are not magic. We cannot save the world with baptismal water. The task at hand, that is, baptizing, is making more disciples. In other words, to teach; the third and final segment of the great commission.

Teach them to obey, the scripture says. Obey all that he has commanded us. The emphasis can be on the word 'all.' Remember, as Jesus walked the earth with disciples following, no one was writing down anything, especially Jesus. The gospels were not written until several decades later.

So, when Jesus said, 'teach all' he had commanded, that meant these disciples needed to contemplate everything they could remember about him. I'm sure there were many fireside chats later on centered on remembering what Jesus had commanded. It boiled down to teaching new disciples a way of living in the world. The word, 'teach' is an enormous concept. It is enormous not only in content, but in the effect it has on people and enormous in the ways it is carried out. We learn much in life by simple experience; self-taught issues. But, the grace of God is not something that can be self-taught like tying one's shoe or treading water in a pool. Learning about God's grace and the love of Christ requires a teacher. Such a person may teach by example or by word of mouth, or both. One validates the other. But first we need to live the life, walk the walk.

I recently read about a woman living in northern Uganda. When the sun goes down, evil fills the streets and children are afraid; afraid of being forced into service as child soldiers by renegade militia groups. So, the children all come to the school where this woman is the only adult with them. She protects them, she comforts them until the sun comes up the next morning. Every night, she leaves her own family and comes there. Someone asked why she did this, she replied (paraphrased), "I am what is called a Christian. I read the bible every day. I go to church every Sunday and we have this little thing we do called the Lord's Supper. Now, how could I do those things and NOT come down here every night?"

She was making disciples. Think of what those children will remember in years to come.

Our scripture ends not with Jesus asking us to regard him as a distant memory, something that happened many, many years ago in a galaxy far, far away. It ends with Jesus saying, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Does that make you feel empowered? It should. What about the woman in Uganda? Did she feel empowered? Apparently so. How else could she have the courage to do what she did? Her task seemed almost impossible. But she had the presence of the trinity with her, just as the Lord promised as she carried out her role in the Great Commission.

Is the Great Commission of 2,000 years ago any different from the same Great Commission of today? Do we go out onto dusty roads with our robes and capes flapping in the breeze and our sandals kicking up the dirt? It goes without saying that times have definitely changed. But, has the real need of people changed? Today, thousands of baby boomers and their children are simply not interested in the church anymore; not even enough to attack it and debate its purposes. Back then, over 2000 years ago, there was no data or discussion about disinterest in the church because no one had heard of such a thing. So, it is hard to make a parallel comparison between those times and today. But regardless of the century, the commission starts with helping people see their need for God and then telling them about Him. It was a challenge then and it still is. Is there something about human nature that silently searches for meaning that can only come from God? If so, how do we tap into that? I don't have any quick answers. Instead of tapping into a need, perhaps we should work on removing obstacles.

Today, we will be commissioning the world's newest Stephen Minister. It is one of the many ways in which we carry out this Great Commission.

In our scripture today, we have Jesus, the Word Incarnate, saying all authority in heaven and on earth have been given to him. Why would Jesus bother to make that statement? Let us remember He did so as he was instructing those departing on their great commission. He was calling them 'INTO' his authority.

He does the same today. In Stephen Ministry, we discuss the reason we have the authority to become involved in the lives of others. Our authority comes from Christ. So does yours.

In hearing these words, we must remember that this is Trinity Sunday. Jesus is speaking in the context of three in one. So, when we read that He would be with us, let us not limit our thoughts to Jesus alone. God, the Triune God, is with us.

And, that's the whole point. You are empowered by His promise to be with us. It does seem impossible to carry out God's will. It is the greatest task in history. But along with it goes the greatest presence in the world.

Now the question is this: are you willing?

Amen.