

Windows to the World: Go Unto the Nations

Matthew 28:16-20

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First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

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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.’

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It is good to be back in this pulpit and with you after being with a group from our church in Israel for 12 days, and – last week – sitting in the pews while our youth led us in a fantastic service of worship.

Today we continue our post-Easter sermon series called “Windows to the World.” Every week, when we gather in this place, we are surrounded by windows that tell particular stories of Scripture. As a child, I grew up sitting in the pews of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church. I couldn’t tell you the first thing about any of the sermons that the pastors of that church preached in the seven years’ worth of Sunday mornings I spent there – but I do remember the windows.

That is the reason stained-glass windows exist, you know. It’s not just about aesthetics – it is about finding a different way to tell the good news of the gospel. Long ago – before it was common for most people to be literate – the stained glass windows of cathedrals and churches were the Bible teachers.

Whether we know it or not, the windows around our sanctuary influence the way we understand Scripture. We are preaching a sermon series about these windows because the stories they tell need to inform the way we see the world on the other side of these sanctuary walls...which, of course, is where Jesus calls us to go when he says “follow me.”

Our second Scripture for today comes from the very end of Matthew’s gospel. It is an account of the ascension of Jesus. The window that tells the story is on the cover of your bulletin – or just to your left, about halfway down the outside aisle.

Listen – or look – with me as I read God’s word...

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Our window for today is called the Morehead Memorial Window. It was placed in the church in 1902 in memory of Mr. John Lindsay Morehead by his daughter, Mrs. Simmons Jones, and his son Mr. John M. Morehead. John Lindsay Morehead was an active member of First Presbyterian Church, who, in his later years, moved north to Washington D.C. He died while on a visit from Washington to Charlotte in 1901 and his funeral took place in this room.¹

Look at the window with me – in your bulletin or the window itself. Jesus is right in the middle – in between the earth below and the heavens above. The disciples are there (some of them look quite young, actually). They seem overwhelmed, startled, amazed. There are two angels on either side of Jesus. These two don’t show up in the Scripture that we read, but look at their hands. The angel on the left of Jesus has her hands folded as if in prayer or worship. The angel on the right has her hands folded across her chest – almost a little guarded. How does Matthew say it? “They worshipped him; but some doubted.” And notice that Jesus is standing on a mountain.

What is interesting about the way Matthew tells this story of Jesus’ ascension is that it takes place in Galilee. In the other accounts of Jesus’ ascension (there are two more – one in Luke’s gospel, one in the second chapter to Luke’s gospel, the book of Acts), Jesus withdraws from earth to heaven in or around Jerusalem.

But for Matthew, Jesus meets his disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee.

Here’s what I learned about mountaintops in Galilee a few weeks ago...when you are standing on the top of a mountain in Galilee you can see a whole lot of Galilee. Almost all of it, in fact. Galilee is a region in the northeastern corner of Israel. It’s not a big region. It contains towns you’ve probably heard of from the Bible: Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum. These were the places where Jesus and the disciples grew up...Galilee was the place where Jesus called the disciples to drop their nets and follow. Galilee was – almost exclusively – where Jesus preached, and taught, and healed, and talked about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus appeared to his disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee...the Bible doesn’t say which one...but in every direction the disciples could look they saw a world that was familiar. They saw home. And listen to what Jesus said – “Go, therefore, and make disciples of the *nations*...”

Jesus said, “Go – beyond this...beyond your home...beyond what you know...beyond what is comfortable for you. The message that I need you to carry extends farther than this...we’ve already spent the time that we had

¹ Williams, Elizabeth, *A History of First Presbyterian Church: 1821-1983*, p. 119.

together spreading the good news here...So, now, go...make disciples of the people beyond Galilee...beyond what you can see. That is where I am sending you.”

Well, that’s scary.

It helps me understand why the artist who created this window gave those disciples the expressions they wear: overwhelmed, startled, amazed.

From the mountaintop you can see the Sea of Galilee that, I discovered, is really more like a big lake. I can imagine those disciples looking down from the mountain at the water where they used to make their living fishing and thinking to themselves, “he wants us to take this message to the nations? We’re only a few years removed from spending our lives in-between the shorelines of the lake. There are only eleven of us. And now Jesus is ascending into heaven! How are we possibly going to be up to the task of making disciples of the *nations*? Of baptizing the *world* in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

But Jesus – he said Go.

Amazing. To trust eleven, very human people with the gift of spreading the good news of the gospel? And, don’t forget, these were the same eleven people who weren’t even present when Jesus was crucified. They had abandoned him. Denied him. And now Jesus was empowering them.

In addition to being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task and the measure of Jesus’ trust, I can also imagine that those disciples felt a little ambivalent. In fact, I don’t have to imagine that they felt that way...the Bible tells us that they felt that way. “[T]hey worshipped him; but some doubted,” Matthew says. It’s strange enough, isn’t it, that even some of those disciples would doubt. I mean they were there. They saw Jesus perform miracles. They heard him preach. They listened as the women told them the tomb was empty. And...by the way...they were on the mountain seeing Jesus...alive...resurrected!

Yet, “some doubted.”

It sounds strange.

But it gets stranger still.

The truth is that the committee of people who translated this part of the Bible from Greek into English (yes...there are committees for that, too...)...this committee was a little squeamish about the fact that the Bible mentioned doubt in the presence of the resurrected Jesus...so they softened the verse to read the way it shows up in your pew Bibles: “when they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.” Here is how scholars say the verse reads, properly translated: “when they saw him, they worshipped and they doubted.”

It’s one thing to entrust spreading the gift of the gospel to eleven people. It’s another thing to entrust it to eleven people who don’t have a great track record of

staying loyal. But it is downright absurd to entrust the gospel to eleven people whose hearts and minds contain a mixture of faith and doubt!

Yet Jesus – he said Go.

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There's a word for what Jesus told those disciples to go and do – as they stood there on that mountaintop. It's called evangelism.

What I want you to notice is that these first evangelists – while I am sure passionate about the task – were also incredibly human, and broken, and intimidated group who believed...but also still had questions about their faith.

I don't know about you – but I find that to be incredibly comforting.

I suspect that for many in this room, evangelism isn't your favorite spiritual practice.

You know the old joke, right?

What do you get when you cross a Presbyterian with a Jehovah's Witness? A person who knocks on your door with nothing to say.

It's funny because it's true. As a tribe, Presbyterians are generally pretty skittish when it comes to evangelism. Oh...we've got our plausible reasons:

- We know that God's grace is what saves us – not our actions.
- Our theology contains the doctrine of predestination which puts the choice about salvation in God's hands, not our own.

There are other reasons we shy away from evangelism, too:

- We've all seen evangelism done poorly – sometimes causing damage to a person's faith – by individuals and churches who attempt to scare people into believing the good news.
- We have a sense that the Christian faith and life is deeper and richer than just keeping tabs on how many people we have "won" in our evangelical efforts.

I think all of these are valid observations – containing truth and honest critique – but here's the thing: Jesus still tells us to Go.

Our reasons, or excuses, or negative experiences that cause us to shy away from the work of sharing the good news of the gospel aren't Jesus' problem. The call to make disciples of the nations still falls upon the shoulders of those who follow Jesus – and last I checked, that includes you and me.

The Scripture we read this morning is called The Great Commission. Sometimes I think we hear it as "The Great Suggestion" – maybe to be taken literally by other kinds of Christians, but not by us.

But haven't you seen the world we live in?
Haven't you felt the need for a world ordered by love instead of fear?
Haven't you met people who try one thing after another to fill a hole in their life that can only be healed by Christ?
Haven't you experienced the pain of broken relationships that are in need of a God of reconciliation?
Haven't you been confronted by the dead-end and intractable problems of our culture that would be impossible to surmount without the hope of resurrection?

Christ calls us to make disciples of the nations – to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – to teach the world about a different way of life – not because the quarter report is due and we have to get our numbers up – but because the people whom God loves and Christ came to save need to know!

They need to know that there is abundant life.

They need to know that they are worthy in the eyes of God and the community of God's people.

They need to know that those whom God loves, God also calls into service – not just to hear the Good News, but to be the Good News.

So Christ commands us to Go.

And, trust me,

I know it's easier to stay close to home...to not venture beyond the handful of relationships where talking about faith feels comfortable.

I know it is easier to keep the conversation with our neighbors or colleagues or casual friends on the surface level – even when we notice that something is going on that might call for a word of grace or invitation.

I know what it is to feel like someone else is better qualified to be a messenger of the good news of the gospel – because they don't have the same, checkered history as you do.

Or to feel unqualified because you have so many questions about the things you are supposed to believe – that you just aren't sure God would even want a messenger like you.

But that's the way it has always been for the people to whom Christ entrusted this message.

And, yeah, it's a little intimidating.

Which is why – when we left the disciples standing there on that mountaintop – Jesus made them a promise: “I am with you always; to the end of the age.”

