

“Open Our Eyes: Go Therefore”

Matthew 28:16-20

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on material supplied by the GBOD¹

Today is Trinity Sunday. This day we worship our God who we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I'm not going to try to explain the Trinity today. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I—or anyone else—could explain the Trinity any day. This is one of the mysteries about God we learn to live with. God is three persons...God is one. One thing I will say about the Trinity is the way God models life for us through the Trinity. God is alive in communion and in community by being Three-in-One and One-in-Three. Just as God's love flows among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, so too are our lives to flow among and between one another in love. If you need to have a picture of the Trinity today, think of the Trinity simply as love shared with us.

Our Scripture lesson for today incorporates the Trinity within the concluding act of the Gospel of Matthew—an act often referred to as “The Great Commission.” And as Matthew tells it in these five brief verses, this story is filled with human frailty and reminders of failure, divine purpose and persistence, and above all—grace. We begin with the eleven disciples.

“Now the eleven disciples...” It's kind of hard to read that: It was twelve for so much of Matthew's Gospel.

- Chapter after chapter, story after story, miracle upon miracle, we read about how the twelve did this or the twelve did that.
- Jesus chose them, all twelve; he went here and there with the twelve; took them aside to be with him as the twelve.
- But now...now it is eleven—a sign and symbol of brokenness, of betrayal and failure.

Numbers mean a lot in the Bible. Twelve stood for the twelve tribes of Israel. For the Jewish people, this was a significant number because it stood for something that was complete, whole. Eleven is incomplete. Something, someone, is missing. Eleven is a reminder that on our own, without the sustaining presence of the Triune God, we won't make it. We can't carry out this or any other calling or mission on our own.

But there is still hope. “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.” Where did this broken group of eleven go? They went home. Not home in defeat, not home in despair, not home because they had nothing better to do...they went home because they were told to go there. These disciples were still following Jesus. So there's still hope. And if they had enough hope to keep on following Jesus, that means there's hope for us too. We can still follow.

- Even in our failure, we can still follow.
- Even in our denial, we can still follow.
- Even in our brokenness, we can still follow.
- And even in our weakness, we can still follow.

The disciples still followed the one who sent them. And so can we.

They went to the mountain near their own hometown and when they saw Jesus, they worshiped him. That seems like a good thing to do. What else would you do when the Resurrected Lord appears on a mountain in your own backyard? [And we have a mountain in our backyard, don't we. What would we do if Jesus appeared up on the mountain? I suspect we'd be inclined to worship, too]. And so they worshiped the Lord on the mountain, but some doubted.

¹ Most of the material in this sermon is drawn from: “Go Therefore,” part of “Open Our Eyes sermon series, *General Board of Discipleship, United Methodist Church*, preaching notes, article online, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/open-our-eyes/trinity-sunday-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/trinity-sunday-year-a-preaching-notes>, accessed 1 June 2020.

Wait just a minute. Some doubted? Right there on the mountain with the Resurrected Jesus standing a few feet away, they doubted? What did they doubt? What kept them from believing?

- Maybe some thought it was a dream, one they'd wake up from any moment to face the awful reality of his death.
- Maybe some thought of their failure, of how they failed to stand up for Jesus at the end, and now that he is alive again, maybe they doubted he could love them as before.

We don't know what those disciples doubted, or why. What is clear is that all worshiped; some doubted; but they worshiped while they doubted anyway. That is good news for us. That means we can come to worship God even when we have doubts, even when we don't fully understand the Trinity, God's amazing grace, or how Resurrection works...we can still worship God. Doubts and doubters are welcome, even in the worship of the Risen Lord.

Next, Jesus told them "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..."

- Now we're talking, the disciples must have thought.
- Now Jesus is going to bring his kingdom on earth.
- He's in charge now.
- The sword is going to be drawn, the white steed is going to be brought out, Jesus is going to mount his warhorse and go off to fight the battle that brings in the new age.

All authority. All authority. What else can it mean? All authority in heaven and on earth are given to me...Go, therefore.

- Are you disappointed at that?
- Are you sorry Jesus didn't call out the angelic armies and his followers on earth and go off into combat.
- Surprised it didn't go this way?

Don't be. This is how God works; it's how God has always worked. It's how God worked through Moses to bring Israel up out of Egypt.

"I have observed the misery of my people, I have heard their cry, indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them (Exodus 3:6-8).

All authority has been given me...so I will send you.

Go therefore gives us our mission from God. It is a fourfold mission:

"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, [in the name of "love shared"] and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Make disciples; baptize them; teach them; and, remember.

Go and make disciples. That's something we could spend a lot of time on...how exactly do you make a disciple? For now, it is enough to know how to begin making disciples: It begins with an invitation to make relationships, to build people up, to engage with the world as it is, so that we can help people see the world as it could be.

I can't help but wonder if this is just what is going on right now in our nation. So many people, disgusted by the latest brutal murder of an African-American man at the hands of some police officers, now coming together to say enough. Enough brutality, enough racism, enough indifference. We have seen enough of the world the way it is...now is the time...now we can see the world as it could be...a world with love for all, a world with equality for all, a world with equal justice for all.

Making disciples isn't about leaving tracts on the doorstep, and it's not about momentary conversion events. Making disciples is a marathon, not a sprint. Jesus doesn't say: "Go win souls." He says, "make disciples."

Souls will be won in the process, but we are not the soul-winners—God does that. We make disciples by showing people the world as Jesus saw it could be, and we invite them into it.

Baptize. Invite folks into community, into a lifelong process of spiritual and self-formation. Baptism is a beginning, not an ending. It is the initiation into the new life that Christ promises us. Baptism is a celebration with signs and symbols of the grace of God that searches us out, invites us into community, and works throughout our lives to make us the beloved community of God’s people. This is a time for joy when anyone starts this journey. We rejoice whenever someone responds to the love of God that is given us in Jesus Christ!

Teach. The Greek word here can be teach or keep. “Keep everything I have taught you...” Keeping sounds a little different, it’s more accessible. It seems like: There’s a treasure to share, some wisdom, some insight, some joy, and some hope. We received it from Jesus, and now he wants us to give it away—to give so that others can keep it. And you remember what he taught us... “Love one another as I have loved you.” That’s the command we teach others to keep. And the only way to teach it is when we do it ourselves.

And Remember. Remember I am with you. Here’s another mystery. Somehow, someway we cannot fully explain to the rational mind, Jesus is with us. This is something we know to be true...we sense it is true. We know we can’t do half of what we do, or even a fraction, all on our own. Only by the presence of Jesus can we put one foot in front of the other. Only by his presence can we issue one more invitation, care for one more soul, one more neighbor. We can only do these things because we remember, we are not alone.

Make disciples; baptize them; teach them; and, remember. Each one of these is important. All of them, together, point us in the direction of the world as God wants it to be. And they begin with the words: Go therefore.

We aren’t the church when we sit still. Sitting still is needed only insofar as it prepares us to go and be the church in the world. The rest of this sermon series will help us prepare to “go therefore.” As we look out on the world Jesus loves we need to:

- See all the people.
- Hear all the people.
- And love all the people.

Our mission, beloved, is one of engagement. Our mission of engagement begins when we look up to view the mission field Jesus calls us to. We are to engage the world, just as we find it, but we don’t leave it as we find it. Our footprints, our handprints, our heart-prints will make a difference wherever we go. Somehow, someway, we launch from this moment because we worship a God who lives engaged. Go therefore, in the name of Jesus. Amen.