

# Towson Presbyterian Church

Rev. Joel Strom

Sunday, April 29, 2018

Matthew 28: 16-20

*“Can You See It?”*

*This Sunday’s sermon is the sermon that I preached at Rev. Carter’s Installation Service over a year ago. It has been slightly edited for our April 29 worship service.*

And so Matthew’s Gospel ends. And it sure does end with a bang, doesn’t it?! If Matthew were writing a screenplay to be made into a movie, he would have penned an ending that could potentially take your breath away. Jesus stands confidently at the top of a mountain in new resurrected glory. As the disciples sit by his feet, wrapped up in the wonder and majesty of this moment, the camera slowly zooms in upon Jesus’ face, the orchestra slowly builds in the background, moving higher and higher as the camera pans in.

When it makes it to Jesus’ face, as wind gently flows through his hair, the music reaches its climax and Jesus shares his final words: *“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* Cut to black. Cue the credits. Beautiful, right?! In undergrad I wanted to be a director. Still do in some ways.

Now that’s one way this scene could be directed, or interpreted. In another version, or from a different vantage point and from a different director, we could have the 11 disciples huffing and puffing their way up to the top of the mountain to meet Jesus, and one of them looks around and notes to himself: *“Well, we’re down to 11. We weren’t that big of a group to begin with when we were 12, and now we’ve lost Judas.”*

They finally greet Jesus at the top of the mountain and he begins his final words, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me....”* And one of the disciples pauses and thinks to themselves, *“All authority? What authority?! Look around, it’s just us here. Where is everyone else? What authority do we actually have?”*

Jesus continues: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”* One of the disciples turns to another sitting next to him and says, *“Did he just say nations? As in those that are non-Jewish? As in those that are different than us in so many ways, that also no nothing about Jesus? Did he just say nations?”*

Jesus continues, *“And teach them to obey everything I have commanded you?”* And of them interrupts and says, *“Okay stop, stop there. Please. No more. Jesus, what you’re asking is impossible.”*

Two very different ways to look at the end of Matthew’s gospel, but Jesus’ message remains the same.

It used to be so much easier to bring people into the life the church, wasn't it? We talk a lot about how the culture around us has changed, and how it has drastically affected the life of churches in today's society, but we probably don't do it enough. Not too long ago all we needed to do was open up the front doors on a Sunday morning and people would walk in, become members and acclimate themselves into the life of the church. I'm probably being overly simplistic here, but in a nutshell, that's all you needed to do.

And decades ago people joined churches because they "should" join a church – because it was the right thing to do. If you were striving to live a good, well-rounded, honest life you joined a church. And those intentions were good – they still are. There's nothing wrong with that. But what happened is that churches eventually found solace in the "should" – people *should* come - and waited for people to get around to coming and joining a church. They should, and so they eventually will.

Churches also found solace in how we talked about the younger generation that had slipped away - college students as an example - who often take time away from church, and God, during those college years, which then often extended into their late 20s. And for years we clung to the hope that they would come back to church when they get married and had kids, because they should.

But the challenge is that people are getting married later and later these days and by the time they get around to having kids, they're in their 30s and Sunday mornings and being a part of a church are no longer a viable option. The calendar has already been filled with other activities and events and church is no longer a part of their life.

Culture has changed around us, drastically. My friend Scot from New Jersey grew up in North Carolina, and he once told me about the difference between how someone introduces themselves to another in New Jersey compared to North Carolina. This is an example of cultural etiquette, but it also points to the role of the church in the culture we live in. Scot said growing up in North Carolina when you first met someone and introduced yourself you offered your name, where you lived, and where you went to church. In New Jersey the last thing you would do when you met someone is tell them the church you were a part of, and I don't find it any different here.

After moving to Towson 3½ hours ago, I slowly started to meet my neighbors. One conversation slowly stands out, and I think it's eerily similar to one that Rob has told us. After exchanging the initial pleasantries he asked what I did for work. I responded "*I'm a pastor, at Towson Presbyterian Church.*" The smile and congeniality that was present for the beginning of that conversation immediately left his face and he literally took half a half-step back from me, as if I figuratively, and maybe literally, was about to hit him over the head with a Bible.

Gone is the "should" when it comes to church participation. It is a no longer a force in our culture. And if we were to listen carefully to what is said by many of our friends and family who are not a part of a church, or maybe instead listen carefully to what is not being said by them, I can hear them asking this question when it comes to being a part of a church: *What's the point? What is the point of it all?* And I think that's a fair question that we all should be asking? Why be a part of a church or a community of faith today? I mean why get up on Sunday morning and give our time throughout the week to be a part of the life of a church, because there are so many

other activities out there that someone can give their time to that *will* offer a sense of meaning and purpose in their life. They will!

What is the point is a question churches today have to ask themselves.

As Matthew ends his gospel with Jesus on a mountaintop in Galilee, in his final words to his disciples, he is actually quite clear. He doesn't beat around the bush with what he is calling them to do from that day on. But before we discuss what he says, it's helpful to note what does he *not* say? Jesus says:

- I am NOT calling you to go and find a place to gather on Sunday morning for a couple hours and spend time with friends. That is a good and healthy endeavor, but ultimately that is **not** what I am calling to you to do.
- Jesus says, I am NOT calling you to go and make people into nice and good and friendly people. Don't get me wrong the world needs more of those people, but that's **not** what I'm calling you to do.
- Jesus says, I am NOT calling you to go and build an institution and a building and do everything you can to keep them going. Institutions can be great arms for ministry, and buildings can offer us sacred space and a place to conduct our ministry, but that's **not** what I am calling you to do.
- And Jesus says, I am NOT calling you to go out into the world and make church members. Membership in a church is a good thing. Joining a church is a good thing, but I am **not** calling you to do that.

Jesus says to his disciples, I am calling you to go out into the world and make disciples. Because initiating them into the journey – the lifelong journey of discipleship - and helping them to learn and to grow and to question and to never stop exploring what it means to love God and love neighbor will transform their lives like nothing else.

For the church, *for our church*, to thrive today and fulfill its calling, it has to be a community where people are transformed. It has to be a place where lives are being changed and transformed by the love of God, and then that transformation then takes them out into the world to be agents of love and peace and forgiveness and joy and life.

And this is hard work. Discipleship is hard work. It is not meant to be easy.

The word disciple kind of gets a bad rap these days, doesn't it? And maybe rightfully so. It can sometimes give off an image of someone who is set apart from everyone else. They're holier than thou; they're a finished product when it comes to spiritual formation.

In actuality, a disciple is simply a student. A disciple is someone who is watching, who is learning, who is practicing, who is listening. A disciple is someone who is exploring.

And discipleship, or spiritual formation, which is another way to say it, is hard work. It is not meant to be easy. And I wish there was a one-size-fits-all template for spiritual formation that could simply be applied to every congregation, but there is not. And there's no single spiritual practice that's right for all people at all times. Churches need a variety because people are diverse.

And spiritual formation could be more challenging now than it ever has been. It seems that our lives are busier and more hectic than ever before. How do we take the time for spiritual practices that connect us to God that will lead to transformation, that will lead to our lives being changed, that will lead to our being sent out into the world to share this Good News that we find here?

Is this even possible?

A year ago, right before worship began, I was in the back about to walk down the center aisle with Rob. The sanctuary was about half filled at the time and people were slowly filing in and taking a seat. Stephen was playing the prelude. One of our members – *one of our disciples* – came up to me as we looked out at the pews in front of us and said, “*Hey Joel, can you picture it? Can you see it? Two years from now I bet this sanctuary will be filled. Can you see it?*”

I thought about his question for the rest of the day. Can I see it? Can I?

I can. I can see it...

I can see groups of people meeting here, in homes, in coffee shops to open up the Bible and explore how these ancient texts still speak to us today.

I can see individuals taking on spiritual practices on their own, in their homes, on their own time.

I can see groups of people gathering together due to injustices that are occurring in our town, in our city, country and the world and saying: our faith demands that we do something about this.

I can see groups of people coming together for the sole purpose of simply being together and enjoying one other's presence.

I can see people in relationship with others here, and outside our church, who are different from them in gender, in race, in socio-economic status, in religion, in sexual orientation, and I can see *both of them* being changed through empathy and compassion and seeing life through a different vantage point.

I can see adults teaching children and teens about God and life and the mystery of faith.

And I can see children and teens teaching adults about God and life and the mystery of faith.

And I can see this church as a center, a home, a place for transformation, a place where we, and others outside these walls, are finding new life in Jesus Christ.

I can see it because each of us took seriously *our* calling to be a community where people are transformed,

Where we each are growing;

where we each are changing;

where we each are discovering the new life that awaits us in Jesus Christ.

Can you see it?

I can.