

## **“He Made Power a Healthy Word”**

**Matthew 28:16-20**

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This morning our attention is drawn to the final challenge Jesus gave his disciples before returning to his heavenly Father. We often refer to this passage as the Great Commission.

Since Easter, we have been examining the resurrection appearances of Jesus after the crucifixion. Today's text takes us to the only appearance to the disciples recorded in the gospel of Matthew. Since Judas hanged himself after betraying Jesus, only eleven of the original twelve disciples remained.

The details of this appearance are sketchy. We are told Jesus met the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, just as Jesus said he would while talking to the disciples on their way from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested. (Matthew 26:32)

The immediate reaction of the disciples may surprise you. **Matthew records that some of the disciples struggled with doubt.**

Doubt about what? We are not informed about what they specifically doubted, but I assume some of the disciples were having a hard time believing Jesus had been resurrected.

We know from reading other gospel accounts of the resurrection this was true. In Luke, the disciples responded to the women's description of the empty tomb as 'idle gossip'. In John, Thomas refused to believe Jesus was alive in spite of the fact the other ten disciples tried to convince him to believe their testimony.

I find this kind of transparency and honesty interesting and enlightening. It reminds me that faith is more of a struggle for some people than others. What one readily accepts another may find impossible to believe.

I believe this is one reason Paul instructed the Philippians “to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” (Philippians 2:12) Life is too complex and complicated to reduce the meaning of it to clichés, slogans and bumper stickers. We do people a great disservice when we fail to take their struggles seriously or merely tell them to believe what we believe.

On the other hand, we provide a great service to them when we love and support them and make our church a safe environment for them to explore the mysteries of life and faith. The last thing we need to do is judge or condemn someone for not having answers to all their questions.

Doubt is not the enemy of those who are trying to formulate their faith. A false certainty is.

**At some point after the initial encounter, Jesus drew close to the disciples and made a bold declaration. “I have received all authority in heaven and on earth.” (Matthew 26:18)**

Received? From whom? Only one had the ability to give Jesus this much authority, and that was the God who sent him on this mission of healing and hope.

Why would God grant Jesus the authority to do anything he felt was necessary? God completely trusted Jesus to use his authority wisely at all times and in all places for all people. Based upon the life he lived and decisions he made, especially during his public ministry, Jesus made power a healthy word.

On February 27, 1991, I had the honor of going to Washington, D.C. to participate in the funeral service for Senator John Sherman Cooper. Senator Cooper was a member of the First Baptist Church in Somerset, and I was his pastor at that time.

Senator Cooper graciously befriended me during my time in Somerset and allowed me to ask him questions about his experiences as a County Judge, State Representative, U.S. Senator, Ambassador to India and East Germany, a delegate to the United Nations, an advisor to Presidents and a member of the Warren Commission that investigated the assassination of President Kennedy. I always looked forward to his visits from Washington and our time together.

His funeral was in the chapel at Arlington Cemetery, and he was buried there after being transported to his gravesite on a horse drawn caisson. The family and friends walked behind the caisson on a chilly but beautiful winter day.

At his service, I spoke on behalf of the people in Pulaski County and the state Kentucky as I expressed gratitude for his many years of public service. He earned the title of a statesman even as a young man because of his integrity, compassion and courage.

“Senator Cooper provided us with the best example of what a faithful steward of influence and power looks like,” I said. “He made power a healthy word.”

The next morning, the headlines over the Courier Journal article about his funeral read, “He Made Power a Healthy Word.”

Jesus made power a healthy word, too. For over thirty years, he showed himself to be a humble person of integrity and compassion.

He did his best to reflect the heart and nature of God by the way he arranged his values and priorities, related to others and handled life’s many challenges. Furthermore, he did not waver when the demand to be faithful to God became difficult. Jesus was loyal all the way to the cross.

God knew he could trust Jesus with this highest level of authority. After the resurrection, God was confident Jesus would not succumb to the pressure to be a king that would threaten, intimidate, judge and condemn those who refused to satisfy his personal needs. Instead, God was certain the resurrected Jesus would remain faithful to use his power selflessly to help, heal, serve and transform lives.

How a person uses power, influence and authority tells us a lot about them. It also determines how many opportunities God can place in their path.

What kind of steward are you of the authority and influence you have? Would those around you say you make power a healthy word?

**“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”** (Matthew 28:19-20a)

I am intrigued by the use of the word, disciples. Why was this word chosen? What is a disciple?

A disciple is a person who chooses to adopt Jesus’ values, priorities and lifestyle while working with other disciples to do together what can never be done alone. In addition, a disciple is a lifelong student who longs to learn everything Jesus taught so it can be obeyed and shared with others.

Specifically, disciples of Jesus value serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, love over hate, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over violence?

They also mobilize to confront evil, right wrong, lift up the lowly, liberate the oppressed, heal the sick, feed the hungry, comfort the grieving and build bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope to all people on this planet.

Every disciple wears many hats throughout the course of his or her day, at home or in the marketplace. At times a disciple is a prophet, a priest, an ambassador, an advocate, a teacher, a mentor, a role model, a student, a peacemaker, a counselor, a comforter, an encourager, a doctor or a nurse. At all times, a disciple is the presence of Christ.

For several months, the staff has been discussing Mark Tidsworth’s book, Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church. We attended a conference the author led last fall at St.

Matthews Baptist Church that focused upon the characteristics of healthy churches that are relevant, effective and productive.

In his book and lectures, Tidsworth emphasized the need for followers of Jesus to see themselves as disciples, eager to learn everything Jesus instructed them to do and to follow in his footsteps.

Tidsworth shared a statistic at this seminar that certainly intrigued me. "The word Christian is found in the New Testament three times," he said. "The word Christianity is never mentioned. The word disciple is mentioned 263 times."

Those who were closely connected to Jesus knew from experience that transforming the world through the power of redemptive love would require no less a commitment than being his disciple. Being a faithful disciple would not be easy for them, however. It wasn't easy for Jesus to be faithful to God. Why should they believe it would be any different for them?

This is why Jesus concluded this challenge with these comforting and encouraging words, **"Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."** (Matthew 28:20b)

You know what Jesus was doing when he uttered these words, don't you? He was living into his name.

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means, God with us." (Matthew 1:23)

Jesus assured his disciples, including us, the demands of discipleship will always be accompanied by his presence and power. No challenge will be faced alone and no opportunity to make the world better will be presented without the promise of our Lord's empowering Spirit.

**"Go and make disciples of all nations,"** Jesus said to the disciples on that Galilean hillside.

**How well are you doing with this challenge?** What kind of role model are you? Do others see Jesus in you?

Who needs you to be their mentor? Could your children, grandchildren or another family member use your help? Do you have a friend who needs you to invest time in their spiritual formation? Will you respond to their need and Jesus' command to help them?

Let me encourage you to do this. I am confident it will strengthen your faith as well as theirs.