

WHAT NOW?

TEXT: Matthew 28:16-20

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on April 24, 2022

Last week we began Easter morning with the women frightened at the tomb in Mark's gospel and ended on Easter night in John's gospel with all the disciples except Thomas and Judas huddled in a locked house, afraid that the authorities who executed Jesus would be coming for them next. Then Jesus showed up, breathed the Holy Spirit into them and said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." All that makes for quite a day. It also must have raised a lot of questions. Like...sent to do what exactly?

Matthew clears up that particular question in the very last passage of his gospel. We have come to call it the Great Commission — Jesus' command to go into all the world and make disciples. Remember that the definition of a disciple is one who is learning to be like a master — in other words, a student. So, by sending them out to make disciples, Jesus' is indicating to his closest followers that they have now graduated. In this moment they change from being disciples, those who are still learning, to being apostles, which means those who are sent out.

It's important to note that the Great Commission here in Matthew is not given at a public gathering. While lots of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were unexpected, this one was a planned, invitation-only event. The ones who should be making disciples — baptizing and teaching them — are those who have studied long enough and successfully enough to be sent out as apostles.

Making disciples is the job of the church writ large, but it's not the job of individuals still in the discipleship process themselves. Jesus called his twelve disciples three years before allowing them to graduate and become apostles, and they lived with him all of that time. Only Judas failed to finish the training; and that was not because he sinned, but because he quit. The other eleven are charged with growing the movement by forming and training communities full of people who want to live as Jesus did — that is to make disciples — so that the vision of peace and loving community the Bible presents can come closer to reality. That's what "church" is supposed to be and do.

A quick glance around the globe makes plain that the disciple-making project Jesus gave his nearest and dearest 2,000 years ago, is not exactly a shining success. There are plenty of Christians; as of 2020, there were 2.5 billion of us worldwide. But are they all disciples? The words of Mahatma Gandhi ring sadly true — there are too many Christians who are not like our Christ. Something has gone terribly wrong in too many places.

So, it's worth going back to put ourselves in the shoes of those first disciples at their graduation ceremony. They are shifting from being disciples to making disciples. What did that mean for them? And what might that same project look like for us? Where have we gone wrong?

In a post last week reflecting on the meaning of Easter, Father Richard Rohr said that God's job description was to turn death into life. I agree. That's God's job. God made that job manifest in Jesus, by turning death into life in his own body. Then, with a breath, Jesus passed that job on to his disciples who passed it to the very first churches, who sought to do the same. All of it was in service to the grand biblical vision to create a world without threat or tears, pain or sorrow. The beloved community — all nations and peoples sharing in the love of God. It was never about a religion per se; it was instruction on how to live in a way that could make that vision a reality.

And yet, here we sit, facing existential threats on several fronts. Death is front and center from the pandemic, to war, to planetary destruction. The job description passed to those of us who claim to be disciples — both as individuals and as churches — is to turn death into life. What does that look like? How did Jesus do it? How did he teach his disciples to do it? Can we do that now?

I propose that there are three commands that Jesus gives his disciples that lay the groundwork for the job of turning death into life. We're going to look at each of them in detail across the next few weeks. But this morning we're going to do something a little different. I'm going to describe each of them briefly. Then we're going to have some dialogue about them so that we can together begin to imagine what the new normal might look like at Crawford. I'll explain that in a minute. First to the three things I believe are necessary to turn death into life.

The first is the central paradox of Christian faith: to have life, we have to embrace death. Jesus lived it out during Holy Week, but it was articulated as a command to his disciples in Matthew 16:24-45 "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." In other words, there is no resurrection without death. If we refuse to let anything die; nothing new can live.

The truth of this is evident both in individual lives and in churches and other institutions. If we find ourselves stuck in some aspect of our lives, it's very likely because there is something that needs to die that we're keeping on life support. With all the energy going there, nothing is left for anything new. At the very heart of Christianity is the ability not only to face death, but to embrace it as the path to resurrection; whether that is being willing to face our own mortality or to come to grips with other necessary endings in our lives. Embrace death. That's the first thing.

Second is the command Jesus gives at his last meal with his disciples when he ties a towel around his waist and washes the feet of the disciples. He then tells them to do the same for one another. We are not only to embrace death; we are to embody service, which is sometimes harder. The one who would be greatest must become the least; the first shall be last. We are not to serve the way a patron gives to those seen as deserving. We don't serve as a superior, but as an equal, without regard to merit. Giving is intimately tied to receiving, and that back and forth is how the beloved community functions. More on that in a couple of weeks. So that's the second thing: Embody service.

The third command is the Great Commission we heard this morning: To make disciples. In other words, multiply the effort. In all four gospels, Jesus calls his twelve disciples right at the start of his ministry. He doesn't go off to conduct his ministry solo, even though that might well have been easier. He hand-picks twelve others, who were there to help him, to learn from him, and, once they were ready, to succeed him and take over the job. Christianity is not the faith of lone rangers. It's how we ensure that any given ministry and any given church is still alive for the next generation. That's the third thing: Multiply the effort.

Those three things—embrace death, embody service, and multiply our efforts—work in tandem to allow God, through us, to turn death into life. Any one of those things without the others can lead to trouble. Without all three things working together, a church will end up in one of three holes: Dead and closed, intolerant and prideful, or burned out and looking for the exit. None are then capable of turning death into life and the world looks like...well, kind of like it looks now.

Those three things—embrace death, embody service, and multiply the effort—are the topics for the next three sermons. But for the rest of the service this morning, we're going to try having a dialogue about those three things in some smaller groups. There are four people who have volunteered to lead and take notes for a group: Pam Reeve, Frank Leathers, Colin Simson, and Sue Powers. If you're on the livestream you can put your thoughts in the chat. I'm going to give you some specific questions and nobody has to say anything if you don't want to, so don't panic.

If the four group leaders would either stand or raise a hand, I invite the rest of you to gather around one of them in roughly equal groups. Once everyone is in a group, I'll throw out a question to talk about. You can just listen in your group if you want to, but please make sure everyone who wants to speak has a chance to say something. We'll take about five minutes for each of three questions. Then we'll close with the Lord's Prayer and benediction. Okay, go ahead and move to one of the four groups.

Question one: Think about the concept of embracing death. What do you think Jesus meant by taking up a cross to follow him? Can you think of an example—either in your own life or the life of someone else—when embracing the end of one thing made way for something new?

Question two: Think about embodying service. Apart from Jesus, who do you think of as a model for what that looks like? How does embodying service help create new life? What hinders a life of service?

Question three: Think about multiplying the effort. What makes it hard to work with others? How does opening up a ministry to others help to turn death into life?