

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 28:16-20

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 32

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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 ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Scripture Lesson: Acts 1:6-11

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 110

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 28:16-20 and Acts 1:6-11

05/17/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

Sermon Series, Part 5: Disciples Transform the World

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The story is told of an attorney who was cross examining a doctor on the witness stand. The attorney asked, "Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?" The doctor said, "No." The attorney continued, "Did you check for blood pressure?" And again, the doctor said, "No." The attorney took a step closer to the witness stand and said, "Did you check for breathing?" The doctor said, "No." Then the attorney seemed to get to his point by asking, "So then, is it possible that the patient was still alive when you began the autopsy?" And the doctor said, "No." Then the attorney said, "How can you be so sure, doctor?" And the doctor said, "Because his brain was in an evidence jar sitting on my desk."

At this point the attorney pursued this line of questioning a little too far: "But could the patient have still been alive nevertheless?" And the doctor wisely responded, "I suppose it is possible that he could have been alive and practicing LAW somewhere." [from "Would You Make a Good Witness?" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

I hope I've not offended any of our lawyer friends out there. Most lawyers I know have had more brains than this poor guy. In fact, when it comes to things like this, there's a reason that lawyers prepare witnesses ahead of a trial. Most of us don't make nearly as good a witness as we think we do. Most of us are not as observant as we imagine. I've heard police and insurance agents complain that when interviewing witnesses, one invariably gets conflicting reports. In fact, not long ago, Brad and I were watching an episode of Rizzoli and Isles, which records the friendship of a female Boston cop Jane

Rizzoli and the female medical examiner for the city Dr. Maura Isles. One episode shows a series of police interviews with various witnesses after a bank robbery. The get-away car was a red, green, blue, white, brown, black vehicle sized somewhere between a sedan and a pickup truck. One of the officers remarked to another, “so all we know is that we’re not looking for a gray vehicle...” and then it cut to the next interview of witness, who reported, “I think it was silver minivan”. Oh, that’s helpful, thanks.

In our scripture lesson from Acts this morning, before Jesus ascends to heaven to take his place at the right hand of the father, he tells his disciples, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Let’s hope we do a better job of witnessing to the work of Jesus Christ in the world than we do reporting on bank robberies.

As we wrap up this sermon series on the new vision statement of the United Methodist Church, we consider to what it means for disciples to transform the world. Today we hear two accounts of Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples. One, which we just recalled from Acts, calls us witnesses. Matthew reports Jesus to say, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you, and remember that I am always with you.” In either case, when you get right down to it, the call is to GO! Take the message, the good news of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and share it as far and wide as possible. Why? Jesus doesn’t say it in so many words, but the answer should be obvious to those who know the love of God in their hearts already – to transform the world. Because make no mistake about it: when you tell people that they’re loved, forgiven, gifted by the Spirit, and they take it in and believe – the world is transformed. It’s hard to see it sometimes. I’m not entirely sure why but it seems that it’s human nature to look at and dwell on everything negative going on all around us. And I’m not suggesting we ignore the injustices we see. But I am suggesting that changing it doesn’t happen by trying to fight hate and fearmongering with hate and fearmongering. I believe that only makes the world meaner and more frightening. As difficult as it is, transformation happens when we put our faith in the divine power of love, grace, and the gifts of the Spirit. Or to put it another way, transformation happens when we follow Jesus by behaving like Jesus.

Angela Akers tells about how, “...During World War II, Nazi forces led by Colonel Herman Kappler occupied the city of Rome. Kappler was infamous for his brutality. All of Rome, but especially Roman Jews, lived in terror of him and his soldiers. One of Kappler's greatest enemies was an Irish priest working in the Vatican, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty. The Monsignor was a fearless member of the underground resistance in Rome.

“Some say that he helped save more lives during the war than any other single person. Many times, Kappler tried to arrest O'Flaherty, or even have him assassinated, but O'Flaherty's huge, secret network of informants kept him one step ahead of Kappler at all times.

“At the end of the war, Colonel Kappler was sentenced to life in prison for war crimes. In all his years in prison, Kappler only had one visitor: Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty. Kappler's greatest enemy visited him every month. And in 1959, Monsignor O'Flaherty baptized Colonel Hermann Kappler into the Christian faith. Why did Monsignor O'Flaherty go into ‘enemy territory’ to spread the message of salvation? Because Jesus had commanded him to.” Jesus tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jerusalem was the city that had crucified him. Judea had rejected him and Samaria was looked on with prejudice and suspicion. The larger world at the time was the Roman empire—a pagan and often violent network of defeated and annexed peoples. Jesus sent his disciples into enemy territory. O'Flaherty understood that. [3 ¶s From “Time For A New Vision” by Angela Akers, www.Sermons.com.]

One of the things that always gets me about this passage from Acts is the two men in white robes – angels – who appear to the disciples and ask, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up

toward heaven?” That’s a dumb question. They stand gaping at the heavens because Jesus just rose up through the clouds. I mean it’s pretty obvious, don’t you think? And sometimes, we all need to look up. We commune with God in prayer, seeking guidance, encouragement, healing, help, or hope. I find that when a burden is on my chest, I cannot help but pray to God constantly for his strength and guidance and comfort in a given situation. But the reverse is also true. When I am diligent in prayer, it is not so easy to forget about the needs and trials of my church family, my community, or the world and its people. One of the lines given to Anthony Hopkins, who portrays CS Lewis in the movie *Shadowlands*, goes like this: “I pray because I can’t help myself, the need flows out of me all the time. It doesn’t change God. It changes me!” Prayer changes us—it makes us more like Christ.

Prayer is powerful. Prayer grounds us. But we can’t get stuck there. At some point, we also need to look around. That’s how God works in us to transform the world. And I think that’s really what those angels are getting at. Okay, time to get to work now! Time to Go! Time to move the message.

This is the last week for a while that I’m going to ask you to be interactive. I know some of you love this, and some of you really can’t stand this and can’t wait for it to be over. Either way, that’s okay. But either enjoy it or humor me this one last time. Turn to a neighbor, make sure everyone has someone to talk to, and take three minutes to talk about these questions:

- 1) What situation right here in Saginaw needs God’s transforming grace and love today?
- 2) What gives you hope?

Okay, let’s hear some answers...

One of the reasons that the cross is such a powerful symbol for Christians is because it not only represents the inexhaustible love of God for humankind, but because it also represents the Christian life. The vertical beam signifies the connection between the Divine and humankind. God has come down in Christ. That same Jesus goes back up in order to send the Spirit to be our advocate. More on that next week.

The horizontal beam signifies that channeling of that love and energy out to those around us. Look around. There’s work to do. Either of those beams by themselves is just a line. But when the two intersect at the heart, there is balance. There is power. John Wesley called it ‘Faith and Works’, but it amounts to the same thing. John Wesley also made a point of noting that the world is our parish. To be sure, we can have the most impact right here. But we must not ever forget that every nation, every tribe, every person is our neighbor, our sibling, our responsibility. Christianity forever nullifies the statement, “that’s not my problem.” Which can be overwhelming. None of us can be all things to all people. But this does not excuse from doing something for some people. Men of Galilee, look up too long and you’ll get a crick in your neck. It’s time to look around. There’s work to be done.

Listen to what Leonard Sweet writes about this: “The generations of witnesses now extends from Jesus’ twelve disciples to the 1.7 billion disciples that populate the world today. And each one of us is still being called to go to the ends of the earth to bring people to Christ. Geographically our world is no longer a mystery. We can get satellite maps beamed into the dashboard of our cars as we travel down the highway. There are no more mysterious edges of the world to fall off, no un-sailed seas to explore. But there are still plenty of edges that require the willingness of Jesus’ witnesses to reach out.

“At the fuzzy edge of knowledge: where scientists and ethicists ponder the implications of gene manipulation, stem cell research, life-sustaining/life-ending decisions—a disciple must witness. At the raw edges of violence: where armies and terrorist factions battle over who will be most feared—a disciple must witness. At the cutting edge of technology: where computers begin to think and react

like humans, where the line between biological and mechanical life seems to blur—a disciple must witness. At the dangerous edge of wilderness: where the threat of extinction hovers over species, and the extermination of habitat endangers the entire ecosphere, making even our weather patterns more severe and extreme—a disciple must witness. At the daunting edge of mission: where Jesus' name has never been heard, where his name is used only as a curse, in the most distant corners of the earth, in the hollowed-out heart of our cities—a disciple must witness. At the tenuous edge of hope: where people are dangling, at the ends of their ropes, their heads in nooses of hopelessness and despair, where life is being lived on the edge at the edge—a disciple must witness to the gospel's unconditional love, unmerited grace, unlimited hope. [2 ¶s adapted from "Dip Into the Well" by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

As disciples, we're called to look up, to turn to God for guidance, vision, inspiration. But we're also called to look around – to go out among our neighbors and community to carry God's guidance, vision, inspiration to those most desperately in need; to be the instruments God will use to transform the world. As Matthew notes, they worship even as some doubt, which I find comforting. We all have our doubts. Being human, we have limited capacity for understanding God's plans and God's work in the world. After all, God thinks in centuries as much as days or weeks. We can't possibly see or know all that's in the works. But we know who it is doing the work. God has been there for us in sickness and sorrow, in hardship and heartache, even in failure and wrongdoing. God never gives up on us, never stops believing the best of us, never stops calling us to the challenge of discipleship in a broken world. And God will see it through. Remember, 11 of Jesus' 12 disciples died a terrible death. Only John survived to old age, and he did so while imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos. So none of those 12 were successes by any worldly definition. But they succeeded in witnessing to the grace, the love, the power of God. And they succeeded in transforming the world. They did so, not by chasing what our world would call success, but by living faithfully as witnesses to what they had experienced. They went. And they knew God went with them and it rippled out from there. The same call is on us. In the end, it is God who transforms the world through us by using our reaching out, our hope, our love to transform the heart of another. I try not to look at the things that divide us, which would probably make me a lousy witness at a crime scene. But so help me, God, in finding our common humanity, in affirming each one's sacred worth and preciousness, in using my voice, my resources, my gifts, and my faith to love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously, I pray to be found by my God to be a faithful witness for Him, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Amen.