

“First/Last Words”

Sermon from Matthew 28:16-20

Given Earth Sunday, April 19, 2020

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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The Eleven made their way to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had summoned them. At the sight of the risen Christ, they fell down in homage, though some doubted what they were seeing. Jesus came forward and addressed them in these words: “All authority has been given me, both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of Abba God, and of the Only Begotten, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, even until the end of the world!”

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In our Bible Study on Friday, someone pointed out how many mixed messages we get from Jesus about who he is – in the story we’ll read for next Sunday, he tells those listening that whoever among them has the least power – the poor, the naked, the hungry, the imprisoned – that’s him, that’s where he’s to be found, those are the people you might mistake him for on the street. And in today’s text, he tells us that he possesses all the power, both in this realm and in others.

And somehow, this man in the Bible Study said, all of that is true.

It's a lot to try to make sense of, to hold in our heads. And we have the benefit, or maybe the burden, of millenia of theological reflection trying to make sense of it. Maybe it's no wonder the disciples doubted, in this scene that's right after the resurrection.

And listen, not "some of them." They doubted. They worshipped, and they doubted. Most translations read, "They worshipped," or, like we read, "they fell down in homage, *but some doubted.*" Only the New American Bible sticks close to the original rendering: "They worshipped, and they doubted." The doubters are not a separate group, or a group within. This is how they all are. They are thrilled. They love Jesus. They cheer and sing songs. They have their doubts. All of them. Like all of us. Always.

And here's the thing about Jesus: he doesn't care. It doesn't matter. He tells that whole group, all of them who believe and doubt – he tells them, go and teach the world what you've learned, the Message tells it, "go and train everyone you meet in this way of life."

And forever – until the end of the world – I will be with you.

Those are the last words in the book of Matthew. They are some of the first words after the resurrection, and the last words of the

instruction to the disciples. They are a promise of presence. The commissioning that happens here – the sending out of the people, to tell everyone they meet of God’s love, to train everyone they meet to follow the teachings about making God’s kingdom happen here – this is what they’ve been preparing for all along. When the disciples are sent out to teach, they’re sent out to teach about life in God’s kingdom. When they’re sent out to baptize, they’re sent out to baptize people into that new reality – a reality of life marked by generosity, and trust, and community. The resurrection of Jesus is, in some ways, a testimony to the idea that this work they’ve been about is not really, or not only, about Jesus – it is about *life*. It is about flourishing. It is about fullness and abundance and it is about *the good news that life persists*.

It’s news that’s important for us to remember too, today, as we try to carve out our lives in new ways. There are some reminders of that persistence, of course – the sunshine we soak up when we step outside, the flower gardens we pass when we walk through our neighborhoods, the quiet streets that amplify the birdsong during the day or the frog song at night.

There is new space and time for that remembering these days. Possibilities are opening up that never have before, and calling us to

consider who we are and who we can be. And moments of profound hope are emerging in that. Like, listen to this description from David Remnick of the New Yorker, of a ritual that happens every evening now where he lives, in the place hardest hit by the coronavirus: New York City. He says,

“The streets are so empty, you half-expect tumbleweed to make its way through them these days. Life now depends on our withdrawal from life. The vacancy of the city is what’s needed to preserve it. But at seven o’clock in neighborhoods across the city, cheering breaks out as though the Yankees had clinched the World Series. It spills from the stoops and the sidewalks, from apartment windows and rooftops. We take out our smartphones and start recording the roar, the clapping, the whooping, the tambourines, and the windchimes. The vuvuzelas. The guy across the street is a master of the cowbell, and we don’t mind.

Before it all dies down, we’ve sent the recording to a loved one, who works in an ER. The cheering is for doctors, nurses, orderlies, EMTs, for the courage of professionals who may work without the protective gear they need. Some have seen their salaries cut, some have fallen ill, or soon will. We’re

cheering researchers in labs across the world, and people who make this city work at their peril: grocery clerks and ambulance drivers, sanitation workers, pharmacists and mail carriers, truckers, cops, firefighters, delivery people. Those who provide straight information to us, who look out for the most vulnerable among us. We cheer the artists who have lost their gigs but are posting their paintings on Instagram, their songs, their soliloquys. ...

With time, life will return to the city. We'll greet our friends at long-delayed Easter services and Passover Seders. Kids will go back to school with their teachers. We'll remember the lost, and we will mourn. We'll remember the sound of seven o'clock."

The sound of seven o'clock is a cheer for life, and for all who are working to preserve it. The memory of that cheer – the way the sound will linger – will be a continual call for gratitude for all who are risking their lives so that others might live. Greater love has no one than this, we were told so long ago, and here we see it, and we vow to remember.

And I wonder: Will we also remember the uglier parts of what's being revealed right now? Will we remember the racial disparity being revealed? Will we remember the way people appearing to be of Asian descent were turned on, yelled at, spit upon, threatened, and worse, because of racist fears that came to light during this time? Will we remember that people of color were hit hardest by this pandemic in our country, because of structural inequalities already in place – that people of color were dying at rates completely out of proportion with the percentage of the population they make up?

Will we remember that during this time when all of our energies should have been focused towards life, this administration seized the opportunity to roll back fuel emissions standards, to undo environmental gains won by previous administrations? Will we remember that they tried to push forward construction on the Keystone pipeline, a project so damaging that 30,000 people have trained for nonviolent resistance to oppose it? Will we remember that when travel was halted they flew in construction workers from around the country to this rural area that already has badly stressed healthcare systems and is located on the edge of a Native American reservation, where people lost 90% of their ancestors to pandemic over the last 500 years?

We won't want to. These are terrible truths to confront now, and they would be terrible to remember.

The writer Bill McKibben said recently that he spends a lot of his life working on the big crisis of our time, the climate crisis, so he's been watching with great sadness and great interest this new virus, thinking about the ways it overlaps with the other, bigger, ongoing dramas on our planet. That he's seen how it haunts everybody all the time.

What do we do with the haunting? What do we do when we find ourselves, like the disciples, wanting to embrace life, and doubting it at the same time?

What if we could spend our time and energy pursuing a way of life that meant that at the end of this, there would be more moments like seven o'clock in New York City to remember? What if seeing the interconnectedness between the crises we face meant we began to work on answers that spoke across those connections? Could we pursue fullness of life, abundant life, with such abandon, that when we re-emerge from this time, we mourn our losses *and* we remember that we sought life with all that we had, we took the

resurrection of Jesus and each of us and our planet seriously, and we dedicated ourselves to the work of cultivating and protecting and preserving life?

That work is happening already, and all over, also – death goes about its work and so does life: the work of making food and making masks and making justice. There is space for all of us in this work, in this pursuit of abundant life for the planet and each one who inhabits it.

May we find our place in this work of life, and join in creating the kind of world we want to remember; and together, may we find ways to cheer on all that goodness. Amen.