

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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October 3, 1999

"GO INTO ALL THE WORLD!"

Text: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

- Matthew 28:19-20

GO INTO ALL THE WORLD!... With Matthew 28:16-20, we come to the end of the day. The gospel story began thirty-three years earlier on a cold December night, when in a stable at Bethlehem, Mary's little baby Jesus was born. Wise Men came from the East to honor the child, led by the Shining Star in the Sky. Then, to escape the lunatic King Herod, Father and Mother fled with the child to Egypt. They returned years later. The Bible does not tell us how they managed it. Next, we learn of John The Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, his Baptism of our Lord, John's imprisonment and eventual execution by another King Herod.

Not much is told of his growing years, but Jesus appears again when He was tempted by Satan in the Wilderness. He prevailed when God's angels came to watch over him. Then He began his public ministry, which would last barely three years. Matthew records the best treasure of all His teachings: "The Sermon on the Mount" (Chapters 5, 6, 7). Then he traveled about healing and sharing the love of God to all in need. He especially cared about little children. He became very popular.

That very popularity began to bother the religious authorities. They became jealous of his success. So they sought to eliminate him. They eventually did, conjuring up fake charges and a farce of a trial, enticing Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, to join them. He was hung on a cross one Friday

noon, and by three o'clock, He was gone. They buried him in Joseph's borrowed Tomb.

But then a peculiar thing happened: an earthquake hit the region on Saturday night and an angel came and rolled away the huge stone which had been set in place to seal the grave. When his friends arrived to visit his tomb on Sunday morning, He was not there. As they were running home bewildered and filled with fear, He met them as a Risen Saviour.

But, all that is over now. In Matthew 28, we come to the end of the road. The little peroration in 28:16-20 tells the final tale. Each of its 84 words is filled with meaning and majesty. On this Worldwide Communion Sunday, let me share a few of them with you.

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Matthew says (and he was there) that the eleven remaining disciples went up the Mountain in Galilee "to which Jesus had previously directed them." It does not say when that happened or where the mountain was. It says only that He met them there. Perhaps they had been there before.

"When they saw Him," it says, "they worshipped Him." Fasten on that word for a moment. It is the first time ever that "worship" is used for Jesus. "Worship" means "reverence for a Divine Being."

He who had been their friend and teacher had become their God. "They worshipped Him."

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We should note in passing that most commentators and scholars caution that we cannot be entirely sure that the report of these final words are the exact and actual words of Jesus. No disrespect intended, but they do seem to reflect the experience and meditation of the early church, rather than what Jesus taught while he was alive.

"The Great Commission," as these words are called, takes on a different character as each of the three Gospel writers reports it. That should not be alarming, or even surprising, given that three different men were reflecting back from say thirty or forty years later (maybe more). Nor should it bother you that each of the three who mention it, Matthew, Luke, and John seem to put a different emphasis or a personal character on what Jesus said. Matthew here, for example, gives it in the classical Rabbinical terms of Baptism, Authority, and Teaching, all required in Old Testament Judaism.

Luke, however, in 24:47-48, emphasizes Jesus' final message as calling for Witnessing and Repentance (see also Acts 1:8)... That is characteristic of the way Luke understood who Jesus was and what he taught. John 20:23 has a third emphasis. So characteristic of John, the disciples are to be empowered to forgive sins (or not) and to be holy and separate from the world, and to share the love of God.

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But, to return to Matthew, it says "When they saw him, they worshipped Him." Yet (listen) it goes on immediately to say, "But some of them doubted." "Some of them doubted." How honest...and challenging. Some of the 11 disciples with Jesus, standing right there before their very eyes, "doubted." How could they? I almost wish Matthew had not included it. Why did he?

Well, it could be that some of them were so confused and overwhelmed with their own grief and guilt that they could not absorb the vision of one who had been crucified now standing before them. It could also be a remembrance (or enlargement) of Thomas doubting the resurrection a week or so before. It does underscore how phenomenal it was for them, too. It takes (took) a while.

But notice something else here. Notice the reaction of Jesus, or rather notice that there was no reaction. He never complained, he never even acknowledged that some of his closest followers doubted his Risen presence. He didn't call them dolts or dummies. Jesus never condemned them; He never belittled them; He never excluded them. His blessing and charge which follow go equally to those who worshipped and to those who doubted. So like our Lord to include everyone. That should bring some comfort and peace of mind to those of you who have doubts.

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The blessing and his final charge to the disciples then follow. He said three main things:

1. One... He began: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." All authority, the Top Command, is Jesus Christ our Lord. Soldiers in the Army must learn first to follow orders. As soldiers in the Army of Christ, we need to do that, too.

In college ROTC I joined a trick drill team. I don't remember why. Team members probably were relieved from some other distasteful duty. But once involved, I grew to like it. Like going to a square dance, it is boring until you start to dance. We marched in various formations. We competed with other drill corps teams in Western Pennsylvania and beyond. We were good, not perfect, but good.

The first rule for the members of a marching drill team, as with a military platoon in battle is: Listen to the voice of authority, the line of command. The

captain's orders are not debatable. For a short time I was Drill Commander. (A good job for me. My wife says that I like to tell people what to do.) They listened to me, the drill team did.

In one of my first sessions, however, I got a little confused. The unit of 12 uniformed students was marching across the Cathedral of Learning lawn on Fifth Avenue, heading straight for a huge row of hedges. I gave the wrong command (I forgot to call "HALT!") Before I could recover (I was new...) the front students in each column had marched right into the hedges. When I got home I laughed, but it wasn't funny at the time. Yet, they listened, Good Soldiers.

But, to get to the point, my favorite maneuver was a routine called, "To the winds, march." It was terrific, if a trifle complicated. In this drill, when everything appears stable, the captain shouts "To the winds, march!" The 12 men then march off to the ends of the earth, or as we say "To the winds." It looks like pandemonium, everybody going in different directions. Then after some perfectly coordinated maneuvers, when they are say 50 feet apart at the widest separation, the Commander shouts "From the winds, back," and they return to the original columns. (I wish you could have been there. It was cool, to say the least. The Blue Angels have nothing on my drill team.) The point was that good soldiers follow the commands of their leader. Jesus has the authority.

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2. Then notice the command. "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me." ... "Go into all the earth and make disciples of all nations." Order Number One! It is not an option whether we should be concerned and involved with all the people of the world. It is a command.

I know there are some within the sound of my voice, and many more beyond, who feel that "charity begins at home," and that what money the church gives away, or the energy we expend,

should stay near at hand. (Goodness knows there are many charitable needs around Palm Beach County and every other community... so they are right that far.)

But, just for the sake of argument, let's say that you are one who feels that we have enough problems here in our County without worrying about Zaire or East Timor or The Sudan. Why should we get involved over there?

Next, assume we are talking about getting involved in one of the greatest problems we face on the earth: overpopulation. I have been reading recently that things are getting better. Maybe yes. Maybe no. Birth rates in the Western Nations have fallen below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per couple. Overall, United States population is indeed growing, currently at 270 million, predicted to be 450 million by 2050. But the increase is due almost entirely to immigrants and their offspring, plus, of course, the increasing longevity of the rest of us.

Current world population just passed 6 billion, up 2.3 billion in 30 years. It is estimated to go on to 9 billion in 50 more years. That's a lot of people. The rapid growth is, of course, in the developing nations of the Third World.

So the hypothetical question is that if you are not in favor of aid or missionary assistance to overseas nations, would you be willing to support a program of increased family planning in those nations, admittedly one of the most necessary and rewarding programs on the drawing boards right now? Need I remind you that many religious people oppose it. The United States is currently backing away from family planning. It is estimated that 350 million plus families (mainly in Africa) want family planning assistance and cannot receive it. Many sensible religious agencies are calling for such aid. I am not talking about abortion, just family planning.

We could argue about it all the day long. But for this moment, I want you to focus it as a Command

from the Commander-in-Chief. Jesus didn't say "I think it might be a good idea for you to mull over the pros and cons of helping people in other countries." He said, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations!" And, where they have needs you can attend to, attend.

America has an historic commitment "to the huddled masses yearning to breathe free." When God first called us forth as a nation, Europeans getting off a boat at Plymouth Rock, He declared a space on earth where religious freedom could begin to grow. It did.

But ever since, the Lord God has been nudging us, encouraging us, commanding us, to focus on the purpose of our nation, to expand our vision and to open the arms of our love to everyone. Christ is shouting from the heavens: "To the winds, march!" Go out to the highways and byways and find the people of all nations and races and wrap the arms of Christian love around them. Care for little children. Care for the elderly. Care for families. Care for those with special needs. Give equal opportunity to all.

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3. Finally, after a command to baptize, Jesus ended with a promise: "Lo I am with you always," He said, "even to the end of the age." He warned that they would face hard times. They did. In many parts of the world, Christians still do. Never did Jesus promise his followers that they would have an easy time. No. He warned them that there would be trials and tribulations, taking up the cross of self-sacrifice, that they would be persecuted and abused because of their devotion to Him. No easy street here. The road will at times be rugged and steep. It is.

All that He promised was that He would never leave us alone. "I will not fail you nor forsake you" says the Lord. Whatever comes, wherever you go, whenever you feel that you have come to the end of your courage, even in the final moment of your

journey... "I will be with you always, even to the close of the Age." That means the gift of His life and death and resurrection as commemorated in this sacrament is His sign and seal and guarantee. For now and evermore. Amen.

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