

“Why Me?”

Matthew 28:16-20

April 1, 2018, *Easter Morning*

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These few verses that form the *finale* of the Gospel of Matthew are what are known to Christians as “The Great Commission.” It is this passage supremely that has provided the Christian church with its sense of mission in the world. It is this Commission from Christ himself that lies behind all the sharing of faith and missionary work Christians have done from the earliest days after that first Easter until our own time, work that has literally remade the world. The Gospel *ends* here but, as is perfectly obvious, it is more of a *beginning* than an end. [France, 411]

Text Comment

- v.16 You will notice the reference to the *eleven* disciples. Judas, the traitor, having committed suicide in remorse.
- v.17 As you can imagine there has been a great deal of discussion of the meaning of “but some doubted.” Probably Matthew is describing not the response of the eleven but of others among the Lord’s disciples, folk who, like Thomas, took longer to accept the fact that Jesus was alive again. Paul tells us, remember, that the Lord appeared, almost certainly in Galilee, to more than 500 of his disciples at the same time. Was that this occasion? No one can say for sure. It is, in any case, another indication of how overwhelming, how confusing, and how utterly unexpected the Lord’s resurrection was and how hard it was to come to terms with it. The morning of his resurrection some didn’t at first recognize him and that evening some, at first, thought they were seeing a ghost. “Fear and trembling, anxiety, uncertainty and doubt struggle with joy and worship.” [France, 413]

The word used for “doubt” here is also used in Matthew 14:31 – its only other use in the NT – and there too it describes not unbelief but a state of uncertainty and hesitation. [France, 412] So this statement should not be taken to mean that some of the disciples ultimately refused to believe, but that it took longer for them to process the utterly remarkable thing that had happened. In that sense the statement in v. 17 is perfectly true to life. Some people find faith easier than others.

- v. 18 We might have expected Jesus to say that, given his absolute authority, *he* was now going to make disciples of all nations. But, instead, there follows a command *given to his disciples*: “go and make disciples of all nations...” Now, very clearly, the disciples are to go in the power of the Lord Jesus. He would be present to help them, as he himself says in the last verse of the Gospel. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the role of the Lord’s disciples in the announcement to the world of Jesus’ salvation is striking and very important. The Lord Jesus would not establish his kingdom immediately, by his own presence and direct agency. Instead he would use his disciples to make his gospel known in all the nations of the world.

The ancient religions of mankind were almost exclusively local, even tribal in their character. Every city, every tribe, every people had its own god whose influence was exercised in that area alone. Judaism, with its monotheistic faith, had a much larger view, but, as it existed in the first century, Judaism was not really a missionary faith. Jesus spoke sarcastically of Pharisees traveling the world to make a convert, but, in fact, on account of various factors – their ethnic identity, their sense of social and political isolation from the Roman world, and their regulations of ritual purity – Jews lived apart from the rest of the population and had little impact upon it. And, to be frank, so it has continued. No one here, I suspect, has ever met a Jewish evangelist! It is the rare Jew who will attempt to persuade you to become one yourself.

But not so Christianity. It was founded upon the fact that the Lord is the Creator of every human being and the King whose rebellious subjects we are. It was with a view to recovering this world and restoring it to happy submission to and a family relationship with its Creator that the gospel of salvation was first proclaimed. The Lord's Great Commission here at the end of the Gospel of Matthew is nothing more than the instrumental means by which that great vision was to be brought to pass. *The nations would come to acknowledge Christ's lordship and believe in his name through the witness of the Lord's disciples.*

And so, it has happened. From Jerusalem and Judea, from Samaria and Antioch, from Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome the gospel made its way north, east, west, and south carried in the hearts and on the lips of ordinary Christians and Christian preachers. In that first generation Paul went as far west as Spain and Thomas as far east as India. In the centuries that followed the spread of the Christian faith from heart to heart continued. But in the modern period it has become still more the universal faith that Jesus said it would. Especially after the endeavors of Christians over the last two centuries it has become possible to speak of a world-wide Christendom. The dramatic progress of the Gospel in our own day, in areas of the world heretofore unreached – think of China or Nepal or sub-Saharan Africa – is *one of* if not *the* principal development of our time.

Full disclosure! My interest this Easter morning is making more disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, to make more Christians, by which I mean real Christians. I'm not interested in people who merely use the name, who think of themselves as Christians because they still have some emotional attachment to the term, or because their parents were Christians, or because they go to church once or twice a year, or because they have redefined the Christian faith sufficiently that to confess themselves Christians means nothing more than that they attach the title, hallowed by the years, to their social and political views, whatever they may be, from progressive to conservative. I am not interested in what Thomas Carlyle once called "the great After Shrine of Christianity," that is, a Christianity that hangs in mid-air, with only the polite and comfortable conclusions left, and none of them any longer supported by the belief system taught in the Bible. There is, alas, a lot of that so-called Christianity in the western world today. I'm not interested in you becoming people like that. I'm interested in your becoming true disciples of Jesus Christ, just as Jesus described in his Great Commission. Every real Christian has the same interest. We want others, multitudes of others, to become followers of Christ as we are.

Not long ago, a University of Virginia sociologist by the name of James Davison Hunter published a study of American Christianity – by which he meant historic Christianity, the form of Christianity that takes the Bible seriously as the Word of God, the resurrection of the Lord Christ seriously, and the Great Commission seriously. In that book he noted that surveys indicated that most Americans have, at one time or another, found themselves in a conversation with a Christian who was attempting to persuade them to become Christians themselves. Hunter also noted that most had found the experience uncomfortable!

I think we can all understand that. Religion is a sensitive subject. Other people have strong opinions about it we may not share. What is more, people are often uncomfortable when they find themselves in conversations about subjects they don't know much about. They feel themselves at a disadvantage. They also don't want to offend but don't know how to get out of the conversation without doing so. And the subject is as personal as it gets. Like it or not, in a conversation about religion, about one's philosophy of life, about the very meaning of life, the questions are as deep as they come: *Who are you really? What are you here for? Where are you going?* Many people don't really know how to answer such questions and find that embarrassing. I should say, by the way, that Christians know this from long experience. It would probably be true to say that most Christians find it as difficult to have such conversations about their faith as do their friends, neighbors, or workmates and for many of the same reasons. *But they talk about their faith nevertheless because Jesus Christ told them to.*

Christians have been involving others in such conversations from the very beginning some 2,000 years ago. We cannot help it because our Lord and Master told us to make disciples of all nations, to seek to make Christians of the people we become acquainted with. This morning it will be easier for you because it won't really be a conversation. I will talk but you won't have to respond, unless you want to afterward. I'll tell you what Christians want you to know and why Christians want you to believe in and follow Jesus. And because you are not the only one I'm talking to, you needn't be uncomfortable or embarrassed. It can't hurt you, after all, to learn something more about the largest religion in the world, about what it teaches, and about what it offers to those who believe. What is more, we Christians are not salesmen; we don't have to close the deal. Jesus never intended his disciples to do anything other than inform, explain, and invite; the persuading was up to him!

So, let me begin. But first I must remove one obstacle or impediment to people taking such information seriously. It is a problem peculiar to our own time. In previous days people knew better. I'm speaking of the idea, very popular nowadays, that all religions are versions of the same thing, that, as we often hear, all roads lead to God. Another way of putting the same idea is "It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere." It is an idea very congenial to the modern western mind – pluralistic and relativistic as it is – but a little consideration, I think, will convince you to reject it as the drivel that it really is. No one really thinks that it doesn't matter what he or she believes. We hold our convictions to be very important. We judge others according to them. No one thinks it didn't matter what Hitler thought, even though he was very sincere in his beliefs. The problem was he was wrong; he was terribly wrong; and so what he did was pure evil. And no one really believes that all religions lead to God. They may say they do, but it would not be hard to prove them wrong.

First, who says that all religions lead to God? No Buddhist says that; no Muslim says that; no serious Christian says that. For that matter, no convinced atheist says that about his atheism either; that it is no more the truth than any religion. This pluralistic viewpoint is held only by people who don't take the claims of any religion seriously, though most of them take their own convictions very seriously indeed. We hear this all the time: a person saying in one breath that truth is self-constructed, that everyone has his or her own truth, that there are no absolute truths, and then in the next breath condemning people who don't agree with him or with her! You can't have it both ways! Second, that all religions are the same, that it doesn't matter what you believe, is a remarkably patronizing thing to say, for, in effect, it means that all serious practitioners of religion or of no religion at all are fools who don't realize that the things that matter deeply to them are, in fact, matters of little consequence. It means that there is no connection between intellectual and philosophical convictions and their implications for life. Really? In what other dimension of life would anyone say such a thing? People who say that all religions lead to God are people who think very superficially in order to comfort themselves in their unbelief.

What is more, the claim is formally illogical. The religions of the world, and, for that matter, just as much the secular philosophies of life contradict one another. The one who says there is no personal God, such as the atheist or the Buddhist, and the one who says that God is a person cannot possibly both be right. The Hindu or Buddhist who believes that there is no distinct personal existence of human beings that lasts forever, that *nirvana* is extinction of individual consciousness and the Christian, who believes that the goal of our lives is eternal conscious fellowship, body and soul, with God and with one another, I say both cannot be right for their teaching is not simply different, the one is the contradiction of the other. Islam teaches that God never reveals his *person* to us, only his will to which we are to submit. Christianity teaches that God draws near to us *as the person he is*, that in Christ not only is God himself revealed to us, but God himself in the only way we could really understand, in the form of a human being, Jesus Christ, the God/Man. In this respect Islam and Christianity contradict one another!

So, let's begin here: Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn't. Christians were always clear about that. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, we Christians have been duped; we're chasing a mirage. We're fooling ourselves. But, if he did rise from the dead, *that is obviously a fact every human being needs to know and a fact with terrific implications for the meaning of life and for hope in the face of our inevitable death*. And, of course, we have no doubt that Jesus rose from the dead. There is not only abundant evidence for that event, evidence that has convinced even those who came to it highly skeptical; but there is perhaps no event in the history of the world that has had such a colossal impact. The Christian faith itself, its origin, its nature and content, and its embrace by ever-growing numbers of people cannot be explained – many have tried but no one has – apart from this stupendous fact: *that Jesus rose from the dead!* I could spend the rest of our time talking about the evidence for the resurrection. Do yourself a favor. Read the account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in one or all of the four Gospels. You will find no legend here, no myth. You will find history, pure and simple.

But for now, *I want you to think about yourself*, about what you know about yourself, because there are a lot of things you know for a fact about yourself. You're something of an expert on yourself as it turns out. You are in every fundamental way like any other human being.

Christians have a strong sense of their community with the world of men and women precisely because the Bible has taught us to face the facts about ourselves, truth we share with every other human being. *What is more wonderful than a human being?* Think about it, because we usually don't. This creature who is self-aware, who can stand back and look at and ponder his or her own existence and pass judgment on his or her own behavior. This self-consciousness is an extraordinary thing. Where did it come from? Or consider the human intellect with all of its powers. The gap between the human being and the highest ape, in this sense, is beyond calculation. You know that it is. And in the same sense, so is our ability to speak. We take this for granted, but it is one of the most remarkable facts about this world: there are creatures in it who have the ability to communicate thought in words from one mind to another and in thousands of different languages. Even Noam Chomsky, the father of modern linguistics, has to admit that there is nothing remotely like this in the animal kingdom. The power of speech is what creates human life because it creates the relationships that are so essential to human life.

And what of our moral nature, our inescapable capacity, even our deep need for moral judgment. The human conscience is another extraordinary thing. We are passing moral judgment – a verdict of right or wrong – on ourselves and on other people every day. Where does *that* come from? This is so fundamental to the meaning of life but no one has or can explain this as the result of some bio-chemical accident. We are creatures of right and wrong. We cannot be anything else. Why do we care so much about right and wrong?

And still we are not done. What of love? Why is love the pinnacle of human experience? Why do we crave love – not simply sex or companionship or association – but love, the affection of the heart, the deep commitment of the whole person: whether a parent for his or her child, or a friend for a friend, or a man for a woman, or a citizen for his or her country. Can anyone possibly deny that we have been made for love; we have been made to love, to give it and to receive it? Why is love the *summum bonum* of human existence?

How extraordinary, how wonderful, how almost divine is the human person! *Christians know how to explain all of this.* Do you? Can you explain it? We have, we are quite sure, the only, absolutely the only credible explanation *for you, for the person you are.* Recently Thomas Nagel, one of the most celebrated of American philosophers and an avowed atheist, dropped a bomb on the comfortable environs of American unbelief. He observed in his new book *Mind and Cosmos* that evolution hasn't and can't explain the uniqueness of the human person. He knows that Christianity has an explanation but he hopes it isn't true. He hasn't an explanation himself, but hopes there is one that doesn't require a personal God.

There isn't! You were made by God in his image and likeness. Your intellectual powers, your capacity for speech – essential as it is to human life – your moral character and your hunger for love: all of this is from God. He made you in all these ways like himself so that you might know him and love him and have a loving relationship with him and with one another. Why love? Because God is love. Why right and wrong? Because God is a moral being. Why speech, that absolutely miraculous power of communication the origin of which no one can begin to explain? Because God as a person who communicates and wishes to communicate with us! You are the extraordinary person you are, with the extraordinary powers that you have because *God made you for himself and for one another!*

Ah, but there is a problem; a terrible problem. Extraordinary as we may be, remarkable as our powers are; utterly unique as our life is among all the creatures on the earth, there is something wrong, deeply wrong with us. You may not be able to say that about other creatures, but you can say it with confidence about human beings. *And we know that. Everyone knows that, however he or she may struggle to ignore the dismal fact.* We know what is good, but so often do not do it. Often, we don't even want to do it. We condemn others all the time on people for doing the very same things we do. We are so defensive in the face of our moral failures but not those of others. In our minds the world lives and dies with *us*. We can be and often are petty, cruel, impure, and dishonest in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds and know perfectly well this is not the way a human being ought to live. *We are so often moral fools doing what we ourselves know is stupid and is going to end badly!* We tolerate love ourselves despite our own foolishness but hate others for them. We admire real goodness in others, but then do not imitate them. We have loved, even deeply, and so we know we have the capacity for it. But then most of the time even our best love is tepid, fitful, temporary, uninspiring. And our worst is; well, you know as well as I do. We are haters, you and I. We love attention ourselves but make a habit of ignoring others.

Christians have an explanation for this too; the only satisfying explanation, the only explanation that meets the demands of the human predicament. The human race is fallen, it is in rebellion against its Maker and his purposes for our life. We were given all these incredible powers – powers we take for granted only because we are so used to them – but then we fail to use them for right purposes or we use them for all the wrong purposes. We have the intellect to peer into the inner recesses of the atom, into a space far too small for anyone to see, but with our knowledge we threaten human life. We have invented the computer and write these remarkable programs for it, and then use the machine to steal, to flood the world with pornography, or to waste our lives on video games. Is this not the story of human life and of every human life? You know that it is. We are determined to screw things up! We never solve our problems because *we are the problem!*

Human beings everywhere failing to reach their potential, human beings so breathtaking in their accomplishments and so disappointing in their personal behavior. Is this not the story of our lives? Is this not the condition of our world? A wise man put it this way some years ago; was he not describing you?

“This is my dilemma.... I am dust and ashes, frail and wayward, a set of predetermined behavioral responses...riddled with fears, beset with needs...the quintessence of dust and unto dust I shall return.... *But* there is something else in me.... Dust I may be, but troubled dust, dust that dreams, dust that has strange premonitions of transfiguration, of a glory in store, a destiny prepared, an inheritance that will one day be my own.... So my life is stretched out in a painful dialectic between ashes and glory, between weakness and transfiguration. I am a riddle to myself, an exasperating enigma...this strange duality of dust and glory.” [Richard Holloway, cited in Stott, *Why I Am a Christian*, 76]

Every honest human being will, must say the same thing. And how can we explain this mystery of human life: the mystery of our remarkable nature and powers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the mystery of our moral failure, our ethical deficit, our falling so far short of what we

know we ought to be and what our life ought to become? How can we even explain why we bother to care? Why so much in life troubles us as it does? The animals don't care! You were made in God's image; that is why you are so remarkable; you were made for God, for the love of God, and the love of everyone else who loves God. That's why you care! But you are away from God, far away; and you are living apart from God; you are a rebel against your Creator. The sad fact is that in so many ways and at so many times *we do not want to be* good; we do not want to do what we know full well we ought to do. *That is our situation.*

And it was into this situation that God himself came for the purpose of restoring us to our true purpose, our true calling, our true life. He said that he had come that we might have life and have it to the full. He meant that he came that we might finally live as we were always meant to live. He gave himself for us, a sacrifice for sin. He died in our place bearing in himself the punishment we deserved for all of this moral failure, all of this selfishness, all of this waste of what God has given us. He gave himself, the Scripture says, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God. By his death he removed our guilt so that as a just God he could begin his work of restoration in us.

And then having died in our place, he rose again to new and eternal *human* life. In that way he restored human life to its full potential. He did that for us so that we too might conquer death! *We don't want you to become Christians so that you might be just like us!* Oh no! We have only begun our journey to the next world and the next life. There is so much in our lives we want to change and are seeking God's help to change. We want you to become Christians, to receive the gift of life that Christ holds out to you, so that you might, together with us, someday become everything a human being is capable of becoming: in heart, in speech, and in behavior; so that you might someday live in perfect love, giving love and receiving love, love from and love for God, love from and for one another. This is what you know you were made for! I wouldn't believe this possible, no Christian would, *if Jesus Christ had not risen from the dead!* But he did! And that is a fact you must reckon with. There is the offer, the invitation, and at least part of the reason why we think you ought to seize it and never let go. You must take it or leave it. But remember, if you leave it, you will not be able to explain either the most wonderful or the most terrible things about you. Your life must remain a complete mystery to yourself. That's no way to live!