

“New Possibilities”
Matthew 28:16-20

Today is Trinity Sunday. It’s the first Sunday after Pentecost, and the first of what we refer to in the Godly Play room as the “Great, Green, Growing Sundays.” And, friends, isn’t there so much growing for us to do?

This Sunday marks the end of another chaotic and turbulent week in America. George Floyd was memorialized in services in Minnesota and North Carolina, and all four police officers involved in his death were charged with serious crimes. Horrifying new accounts of the killing of Ahmaud Arbery surfaced in a courtroom in Georgia. Breonna Taylor of Louisville would have celebrated her 27th birthday on Friday. And the protests continued, our city streets filled with rightfully-outraged people — some of you among them — people fed up with the senseless loss of these precious lives, and the lives of so many others. It has been quite a week.

As I have tried to grapple with all that has happened, I haven’t really been able to trust my emotions. They’ve been all over the map. I’ve gone from feeling overwhelmed with sadness to hopeless and cynical; from defensive anger to shame-filled remorse. My greatest temptation is to throw my hands up and say “what can we do?” Maybe you can identify with this inner upheaval and dizzying array of reactions.

One thing I know for certain though: I have never been more convinced that we need more people in our society who are serious about living in the way of Jesus. I have never been more convinced that we need more people who are committed to loving their neighbors, caring for the poor, and forgiving those who offend them. We need more people who are committed to standing up for the down-trodden, affirming the inherent dignity of every human being, and speaking truth to power. We need more peacemakers and people who dare to love their enemies. We need more people who are willing even to lay down their very lives for what is right. We simply need more Jesus-following people in every hurting community, in every troubled place in this world.

And that’s why I’m encouraged by today’s gospel reading, because it seems that Jesus feels the same way.

Some 2,000 years ago, Jesus gathered a small group of trusted friends and sent them out to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Triune God and teaching them to adopt a new way of life.

Despite the magnitude of this task, however, this group gathered in Galilee was not a very impressive bunch. Matthew’s account here seems to especially highlight the frailty of the disciples; a few details really stand out in that regard. First, we are immediately reminded that it’s not the Twelve disciples anymore, but the Eleven. Judas had betrayed Jesus to the authorities and, soon after, met his demise. So the full membership of the inner circle of disciples didn’t even make it to this culminating moment on the mountain with Jesus.

The second detail relates to where the gathering was taking place. Matthew places this closing scene of his gospel in Galilee, apparently in line with Jesus' own post-resurrection instructions. In contrast to Luke, who has the disciples remaining in Jerusalem, here we have the Eleven shuffled away to an anonymous location, far away from the center of the action, as it were. They come off less like a band of brothers ready for a mission and more like a confused bunch of tourists who have blindly followed their GPS into the middle of nowhere.

Finally, there's the noticeable mention that although the disciples worshipped when they saw Jesus there, some doubted. The appearance of Jesus before them — his first in their presence since his resurrection — could not be taken at face value; it was too amazing to be possible, they must have reasoned. Their humanness, their fragility as people of imperfect faith is on display. Nevertheless, Jesus entrusts them with this great commission.

Maybe it's just because we're in the season right now, and we're going to be recognizing our high school graduates later in the service, but it seems like almost a commencement-speech type moment for Jesus. These men have been with him for about three years — just shy of the amount of time our graduating seniors have been in their respective high schools. They have studied Jesus' teachings, preparing for some kind of meaningful vocation beyond this period of apprenticeship. They have surely grown and matured in significant ways as a tight-knit community during this time — and yet, now they are to go out on their own. What does Jesus say in a moment like this? What will his final in-person address to them communicate?

We really don't have to go beyond the first sentence Jesus utters to get our answer. This is what Jesus believes the disciples most desperately need to hear in this moment. In a few brief words the disciples are met with a jaw-dropping, world-changing truth: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," says their teacher.

What. A. Statement. Here is Jesus, resurrected and soon-to-be ascended, proclaiming a new and all-encompassing power. Here is Jesus, dark-skinned Middle Eastern man, asserting his dominion over all humankind and all creation. Victim of institutional violence, body scarred by brutal execution at the hands of the most powerful government on the face of the earth — here is Jesus claiming his rightful kingship over everything God has made. In the midst of an empire that declared "Caesar is Lord," Jesus — casualty of the political agenda of one of Caesar's own underlings — has staked his claim to supreme lordship.

We cannot overstate the importance of this fact. King Jesus has announced his reign. King Jesus reigns over everything with absolute authority. His body — wrapped in brown skin, bearing the enduring marks of torture — his body is the physical center of the new power structure of the universe. The former regime has passed away. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has rendered it defeated.

Brothers and sisters, this changes everything.

Because the crucified and risen Jesus has been given all authority, new possibilities are opened up.

We take it for granted, but this could have all played out very differently. We can imagine a very different version of this post-resurrection conversation between Jesus and his closest allies — one in which their motives aren't quite so altruistic. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, let us go and get payback. Now is our chance to avenge this wrongdoing and exact retribution on all who opposed us. We are in charge now, and our enemies will pay."

Undoubtedly this scenario follows much more closely with our current cultural script. And it also gets at the tremendous anxiety that privileged people have about giving power away to those who have suffered grievously at the hands of an unjust system. It doesn't always go well for those formerly-in-power.

But that is not Jesus' agenda. That is not what he wants to do with his authority. Jesus doesn't charge his disciples to go and get payback. Instead, he commissions them to go and give something away: to give freely the gift of liberated life-in-community with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to people of every race and nation.

Because Jesus has been given all authority, friends, a different kind of world is possible. A world marked by fairness and justice is possible. A world where former enemies — oppressed and oppressors — live together in flourishing peace is possible. A world where violence and hatred and evil give way to mercy and love and goodness — is possible.

And this is not me doing my best "Imagine" cover. This is not wishful thinking or empty optimism. To be a Christian is to believe that this is the case, specifically because of Jesus. Precisely because of who he is and the life he lives, Jesus is uniquely able to inaugurate this new world in himself. Jesus himself has made it possible in his own body — his own hated and cursed and spat-upon and battered and broken and crucified body; his body which does not inflict violence in return for violence but embraces and forgives — and commissions.

The embodied grace of Jesus offers us belonging, transformation, and hope. There is much work to be done, much growing that remains, but we know the way. Jesus has given us the road map, the practices and ways of living that will lead us to this very real destination. The path of discipleship awaits us. And Jesus has promised that he will walk alongside us.

May we hear his voice today and embark on this journey toward a new possibility.

Amen.