

The Resurrection Imperative¹

I believe that we have a theme coming into view with these sermons since Easter. The theme has to do with what Jesus' resurrection meant in the early going. We're thinking that Jesus is suddenly, unexpectedly, alarmingly back with the disciples. What did that mean for the disciples?

One answer—what I want to talk about today—is that Easter meant being sent. In every instance that the Risen Jesus reveals himself to his disciples he gives them instructions. The angels at the empty tomb tell the women to go quickly and tell the other disciples. Or, from the risen Jesus: "You are my witnesses," Or "Feed my sheep." So, Jesus rising from the dead ushers in a new mode where there is a natural and important necessity that Christians—that includes you and me—be busy with Jesus' work and message in the world. Easter means mission.

Today, we consider those magisterial words traditionally called the Great Commission. Now, if you or I had time to look at what all the great biblical interpreters say about the Great Commission, we'd be impressed with how important they think it is. These final words by the Risen Jesus are the culmination of Matthew's gospel. The business of duplicating ourselves as disciples isn't just periodic membership recruitment to keep the

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on April 18, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia. More information about First Presbyterian Church and other sermons can be found at www.fpclagrange.org

membership up. What the church does essentially is disciple-making. All church things—worship, Sunday school—serve the cause of making disciples, or if they don't, should.

Now, we drill down deeper and ask, "Why is mission so important? Why is the church essentially a missionary operation?" Here's where Matthew's vision blows our minds. The reason we get here is because Jesus has just been granted authority.

Think what it means for the resurrected Jesus to say this, namely "all authority has been given to me." Only a few days before, the religion leaders, the Roman political and military authorities, even the mob of everyday Jews on holiday in Jerusalem came to an agreement that Jesus needed to go. He needed to be dead. We might say that Evil itself had played its biggest hand ever and basically said: "I run this town. I run religion. I run the government. Even the little demons that are so obnoxious, even these work for me. So, Jesus, if you want to come around here and challenge my power, if you want to teach that I'm not in charge, then I've got a little surprise waiting for you atop a hill called Golgotha just outside of town."

For Jesus to die was far more than the sadness of a death where people lost a friend. Jesus' death was a lesson in who's

the boss. This is why the crucifixion was done outside of town where passersby would see and learn their lesson. Evil runs the show. Don't mess with it.

So when Jesus walks back into the lives of the disciples, not only are they startled, not only are they glad, they also realize that Evil's not in charge. The resurrection represents a decisive moment in the politics of the cosmos. The creator God of Israel yet reigns over heaven and earth.

Back in my student days at Princeton Seminary I heard a story about one of the professor's wives. Years before she had been hired by the seminary library for small clerical tasks. She came from a modest social background and some of the library personnel very much looked down on her. Now in Princeton, New Jersey, if you don't have a master's degree you're a drop out. Even the graffiti in the Shell Station men's room is in Latin. So you can imagine what it was like for this single clerk librarian in such an uppity atmosphere. Now one of the venerable aging theologians, Norman Victor Hope, saw something wonderful in the library clerk. One day she came to work with a diamond ring on her finger. Well, suddenly the future Mrs. Norman Victor Hope suddenly enjoyed a recalibrated social status.

Something like this, only infinitely bigger, happens on Easter. Suddenly, all that Jesus had said about the Kingdom, the reign of God, suddenly all of those teachings loomed up as powerfully important. All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. It's beginning to make sense.

In view of the earthquake shift in who's in charge on Easter, the disciples of Jesus have a special task. Jesus commissions a little group of people—his followers—to replicate themselves on a worldwide scale. The Christian vision for the salvation and recovery of the world is disciples going out and inviting and nurturing others to be followers of Jesus.

In late June a group from this church will fly to Belize and drive to a remote place in the jungle where there are a bunch of children of refugees. The Belizean government isn't much interested in expending resources in these children. We're going down there and will work for a few days with these kids. We'll love them up and maybe teach them something about Jesus. Now, here's what that act says: "Jesus loves the little children all the children of the world." And that Jesus who loves children reigns in heaven. Poverty doesn't reign. Indifference doesn't reign. National origin doesn't reign. Oppression doesn't reign. Neglect doesn't reign. Jesus reigns. Our being there is a way of saying that Jesus reigns.

Now, you certainly don't have to go to Belize or even work with kids to live as citizens of the reign of the Risen Christ. Jesus has taught you and me a whole new way of going about living that is possible because Jesus reigns. If someone slaps us on one cheek and we, as Jesus has taught, turn the other, aren't we really saying, "Always getting my due, never permitting myself to be put down isn't so important? Jesus reigns—that trumps my having to hold my position in the world. Think of what we learn from Jesus. Not worrying about the necessities of life, not lusting, not disrespecting people, and so on. These are ways that our lives say that power and social control aren't calling the shots. The Lord reigns! Even the simple act of inviting a friend to church or encouraging someone to trust in God's goodness is a statement on who is running the world and where this world is headed.

I hope you're sensing the majesty of what Jesus is calling us to. We live in a sometimes soulless consumer culture that really looks down on people, on you and me. It assumes that if it can put an iPod in someone's hand or lure us to a vacation in the Bahamas that that's all that we could ever want in life. The call of our world is always the call down. Down from being responsible, down from having to think, down from great truth, down from struggle. Hey, if we have marble countertops, a late

model truck and a dazzling white smile—what else is there? How dumb does our world think we are?

Jesus, the risen Lord calls us to be a part of bringing his kingdom into fullness. Of course, we'll never totally succeed at that. But we're summoned to help. That call lifts you and me. It takes all we've got. The sending by the Risen Jesus is a glorious life.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me. Resurrection. Easter. Something momentous has dawned. Evil, the gods of this world have been hit hard. The time of mission has arrived. And you and I are summoned to it.