



“New Beginnings” message for congregations seeking a new thing

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Matthew 28 (*The Message* by Eugene Petersen) Risen from the Dead

1-4 *After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God’s angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn’t move.*

5-6 *The angel spoke to the women: “There is nothing to fear here. I know you’re looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.*

7 *“Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ That’s the message.”*

8-10 *The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. “Good morning!” he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, “You’re holding on to me for dear life! Don’t be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I’ll meet them there.”*

11-15 *Meanwhile, the guards had scattered, but a few of them went into the city and told the high priests everything that had happened. They called a meeting of the religious leaders and came up with a plan: They took a large sum of money and gave it to the soldiers, bribing them to say, “His disciples came in the night and stole the body while we were sleeping.” They assured them, “If the governor hears about your sleeping on duty, we will make sure you don’t get blamed.” The soldiers took the bribe and did as they were told. That story, cooked up in the Jewish High Council, is still going around.*

16-17 *Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally.*

18-20 *Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”*



Tending the grave or accepting the commission?

Matthew 28: 1-10; 16-20

I've been living with Matthew 28 for a few weeks now because it keeps speaking a message about 21st c. Christendom. Sometimes, I read the Bible and I feel so far away from the events and the emotions and the circumstances described. Then, there are times when the characters just climb out of the pages and come to dwell for a bit...to sit beside me with our cups of coffee to help me make sense of our world... to talk with me in my living room about how it is any of us can actually be disciples of Jesus Christ in this techno-spiraling, globally-connected, "nobody-really-knows-the answers" kind of world which is ours. So, I invite you, too, to live with the people and the emotions caricatured in the 28th chapter of Matthew.

Mary Magdelene and the other Mary go to tend the grave of their beloved friend... but he was so much more than a friend...this man Jesus taught them how to think of life in terms of inclusion; not exclusion. He taught them how to welcome the strangers, minister to the needy, eat with outcasts and listen to the problems of people no one cared about. He was a pretty much non-stop, on the go, defender of the least of these...wherever he went. He spent little time trying to maintain the status quo of institutions and a whole lot of time challenging the way things have always been. And he made things personal. He recognized that Mary Magdelene, whom some considered unclean, was the perfect confidante and that she could be a pretty fine evangelist as well. The other Mary was a trusted colleague too...she was an intellectual whom Jesus could trust to share his ideas...yes, he was so much more than their friend...this man, Jesus, listened to them and gave them new life because he brought to them a new, a different way of living. He gave them a new political, social and spiritual way of engaging in God's work in the world.

I met another woman named Mary at a gathering of leaders from 16 congregations in [region]. All over the country, for the last two years I have been meeting with congregations like Mary's—congregations that are in severe decline where people need ideas about congregational vitality and transformation. When I met Mary, the leaders of her church and several other congregations had just received a 40 page report detailing their decline over the last 20 years. Once brimming with hundreds of folks, the reports showed that most of these congregations have 50 participants or less. These churches were spending more than 90 percent of their budgets on building maintenance and administration and less than 10 percent on mission and program. Together, these 16 congregations held 70 million dollars worth of property and endowments but averaged together only 722 people in worship on any given Sunday. It was at the point when I asked the church leaders to talk honestly with each other about their PASSION for ministry in their communities when Mary started to cry. Tears streaming down her face, Mary said, "We have no passion." "Our church is a tomb. We're really pretty dead." She went on, "Every Sunday, we come faithfully, but there are fewer and fewer of us to put out the communion, to teach Sunday School, to tend to the ministries of being and sharing Jesus with our community."

Through my work with many congregations in the last couple of years, I know that the tears of this particular Mary are the tears of so many. Did you know that some 2500 of the 3700 Disciples of Christ congregations, across the United States and Canada, have experienced steady decline in participation and outreach for more than 10 years? If you draw line graphs indicating average worship attendance and financial giving adjusted for inflation from 1998 to 2008, MOST CONGREGATIONAL graphs

show steep downward trends whose angle, unchecked, will meet the 0 mark on the graph in the next 10-20 years. Did you know that of the 180 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that were started in the 1950's, only eight have enough resources—people and money—to remain viable beyond the next few years? This is because many of these 1950s churches were suburban church starts where white flight neighborhoods have now turned to racially inclusive neighborhoods, while the congregations have remained white and increasingly elderly. And one last...did you know...as I go from preaching to med-dling :-). Did you know that in the last 10 years, [your congregation's] worship attendance has declined by [30] percent and giving to outreach and mission has decreased by [50] percent?

I share these statistics not to point fingers or to cast blame. But just to say again that most people in most Disciples congregations are looking at declining trend lines. I say it, too, so that you can better understand why people cry when they see these trend lines. After all, we are talking about “our” little part of the body of Christ where for 50 or 80 years we have come faithfully to morning worship, taught Sunday School, reached out to neighbors, raised money for children's homes, built Habitat homes, shared Vacation Bible school with hundreds of children, gone on mission trips... We're talking about our home where our babies were dedicated and married...where our parents, our spouses, our friends were mourned. We're talking about years of relationships and friends.

In [location] that day, Mary wiped her tears and choked out a few words describing her emotion, “It's as if our Jesus is wrapped in a shroud and the rock in front of the tomb is closing shut.”

So, in my living room this week over coffee with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, I asked them what they would say to their namesakes in San Diego and Long Beach and Walla Walla and Norfolk and Grandview and Daytona Beach and Indianapolis. I said to those Marys as we sipped our way through conversation, “These people really understand that you can't just make minor adjustments; you can't just work harder; you can't just pray harder; and you certainly can't keep letting things go the way they are and expect to resurrect the churches in our land.” And, I said to these Marys, “I don't even think the tears are mostly about the grief of losing the church that was.” “Really,” I said, “we know deep down that being church means doing things a whole lot differently than the ways we did them in the 60s and 70s and 80s and 90s. I think the tears are because we're afraid we don't have any answer. Or, because we feel guilty about not being able to figure out how to turn things around. I also think the tears come because we're very tired; we've worked hard trying to be the church folk we thought we were supposed to be.”

And Mary and Mary just looked at me, finished their coffee, and got up to leave. “Tell them what the angels told us,” Magdalene said. “Tell them that Jesus is not in the grave.” And then the other Mary added the rest of the story, “You and they should get on your way quickly, run fast (go on segues if you need to) and tell the other disciples, ‘Jesus is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ That's the message.” And so the Marys left me alone.

They left me, I know, because I was getting ready to argue with them. If they had stayed around I would have told them how hard it is to be church in this “post-modern” age. Until this new millennium, we lived in a majority Christian nation. Now, more than half of the U.S. population isn't affiliated with any kind of institutional religion, much less Christianity. We used to be a people who held weekends sacred for family and church. Now, sporting events and entertainment and road trips and grocery shopping



compete for our Sunday time. Besides all of that, people seem to be finding God in yoga studios, on mountain bike rides, and in Facebook conversations more than in any gathering of church-folk. What's more, our neighbors used to be so much like us. Now, we find ourselves struggling to know how to communicate with the Spanish speakers who moved in down the street.

And then the best argument I could think of formed in my head. "Mary and Mary, our people have gotten very used to the familiarity of church. It will be so hard for us to give that up now. We have so counted on church being the thing that didn't change in a world where everything else has—like a club where people know our names and we can rely on people to show up when we need them." I argued with the Marys in my head, "You have no idea what we're up against in 21st century America," I said. "Is it too much to ask that church could just be our safe haven?"

Of course, as soon as the arguments were formed in my mind, I heard their voices. "Well, you can stand guard over the tomb if you want, but Jesus is not here. He's gone ahead to Galilee to be with his disciples. Jesus is on an authorized mission from God. He's charging his disciples to Go out and train everyone they meet, far and near...training them in his very way of life; marking them by baptism; then instructing them in the practice of being the voice and hands and heart of good news for a hurting world. He's even promised to stay with them until the end of their work...day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

The Scripture says that Mary Magdalene and her cohort called on the 11 disciples to Go into Galilee making disciples of all nations. In this case, Galilee is not a specific place but refers to the whole region of peoples and places and cultures and identities beyond the boundaries and beyond the comfort zone of Judaism. "Go to Galilee" means open wide the gates, go share the words and the ways and the instructions of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ with those who haven't heard....so that God's holy ways can change the lives of others just as they have changed yours. The message "Go to Galilee" is not just a commission. It's an invitation to imagine the possibility of all the wholeness that can be offered to a fragmented world...all the lives that can be transformed, all the poverty that can be relieved, all the swords that can be turned to plowshares, all the healing that can be granted by setting up missionary outposts in places that need good news.

Of course, if we were to gather with the biblical Marys over coffee at fellowship hour today, they would speak the same message to us as they spoke to the eleven. The Christian call today is no different than it was two thousand years ago: to go into our Galilean neighborhood, town, and community and be disciples of Jesus Christ. I don't know what this looks like for [your] Church in the next few years. I don't know the prescriptions and the details for what your new vision for ministry will be in this wildly changing world in which we live. But I do know that every congregational mission looks different—the church in Corinth looked different from the church in Galatia. I do know that the five-mile radius around [your] Church has [most likely] changed in terms of demographic profile in the past 10 years. I do know that congregations who don't figure out how to adapt their missions to fit the deep needs of their communities are shrinking in upon themselves. I do know that reaching new people will mean doing most things differently—worshipping differently, making decisions differently, using building space differently, praying less for personal comfort and more for people you've yet to meet. And, there is one more thing I know: I do know that Jesus promises to be with you. "Go ahead with your mission. Go talk to people in

the streets. Go to the places where people are desperate for healing and wholeness,” Jesus says, “and I will be there waiting for you. Together we will figure out what God is asking of us in this time and in this place. Together!” Jesus says.

So, friends, as you start your new visioning process, I promise to add my prayers to yours. I can't wait to hear about what you find in this Galilee on the [location] that calls out to you in need. I can't wait to hear the stories of the risks that you take; the creative ways you figure out how to minister to the particular challenges of this community; the joy you bring to people who have precious little good news in their lives. And, I can't wait to catch up with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary so that I can tell them that their message was heard. So that I can tell them that the disciples in [location] have gone to do a new thing. So that I can tell them that you were met by Jesus, just as he has promised. And more were added to your number, day by day by day. May it be so.