

BEFORE THE GREAT COMMISSION

Matthew 28:1–10, 16–20

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on April 16, 2017, Easter Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.’ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

...

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Prayer: Lord of all creation: May the resurrection of Christ to which through this sermon I seek to bear witness today both blend with and yet exceed in beauty the light of rising and setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers. In the name of the risen Christ, we pray. Amen.

I.

Several years ago, I read, for the first time, Herman Melville’s novel *Moby-Dick*.

As you may know, the novel is set in the nineteenth century, on a whaling boat off the shores of Nantucket. Among the many things Melville does in this novel is capture the danger to all sailors who accept the commission to live and serve on a whaling ship.

Early in the novel, he describes the Whaleman’s Chapel, in New Bedford, where sailors and their families often worship *before* setting sail or *after* returning safely to shore. Melville describes the chapel with its “several marble tablets, with black borders, masoned into the wall on either side of the pulpit.” In the presence of such tablets, “sailors, and sailors’ wives and widows” sit in their pews “in muffled silence.”

Melville then shares with the reader words etched into three of the tablets:

*Sacred
To the memory
Of
John Talbot,
Who, at the age of eighteen, was lost overboard,
Near the Isle of Desolation, off Patagonia,
November 1st, 1836.
This Tablet
Is erected to his Memory
By his sister.*

~

*Sacred
To the Memory
Of
Robert Long, Willis Ellergy,
Nathan Coleman, Walter Canny, Seth Macy,
And Samuel Gleig,
Forming one of the boats' crews
Of
The ship Eliza,
Who were towed out of sight by a Whale,
On the Off-shore Ground in the
Pacific,
December 31st, 1839.
This Marble
Is here placed by their surviving
Shipmates.*

~

*Sacred
To the Memory
The late
Captain Ezekiel Hardy,
Who in the bow of his boat was killed by a
Sperm Whale on the coast of Japan,
August 3rd, 1833.
This Tablet
Is erected to his Memory
By
His widow.*

Melville comments:

...few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to *this* spot.¹

¹ Chapter 7, "The Chapel," in Herman Melville, (New York: Castle Books, 2004), pages 42-45. Originally published in 1851.

Before embarking on their dangerous mission, these mariners worship God in the most sacred space on the shore.

II.

Over the past few months, I have had several experiences with members of our church that remind me – once again – of how important an act of worship is *prior to* undertaking a great task or shouldering a great responsibility.

- A grown man speaking to a small group of people, referring to the baptism of one of his children nearly twenty years earlier, grows silent, tears up, then moves on to the next subject of the conversation. His quiet show of emotion reminds me that the Sacrament of Baptism is a significant act of worship at the outset of exercising the responsibility of parenting, particularly as the parents state – in the midst of the congregation and in the presence of God – their intention that their child grow up “to be Christ’s disciple, to obey Christ’s word, and to show Christ’s love.”²
- Since the first of the year, I have conducted six funerals or memorial services, three of which have been one of two services in two cities for the persons who have passed away. This is a higher than normal number of funerals for such a short period of time. But in leading these services, I have been reminded *once again* how important the service of worship is in preparing those left behind to live *through* the grief and *with* the memory of the one who has passed away. This is why we begin nearly every memorial service, asking God to “speak to us of eternal things, that through patience and comfort of the scriptures we may have hope, and be lifted above our darkness and distress into the light and peace of Thy presence.”³ The funeral – an act of worship – prepares the *living* for life without the one who has passed away.
- On recent back to back weekends, I officiated at the marriages of two couples who had joined the church within the past year or so, and whose services in this sanctuary were particularly beautiful. One couple had written their own vows – something that normally puts fear into the heart of the minister – but in this instance the vows expressed their love for one another and for God in a way that was both personal and bore witness to the church’s theology of marriage as a covenant between two people and their God. I was reminded *again* that in the midst of all the preparation for the wedding, the reception and honeymoon, in the midst of the family dynamics beautiful and tense that surface at weddings, the one-half hour of worship that is the marriage service is crucial in providing the couple that for which we pray during the service: “a new frame of heart fit for their new estate.”⁴

It is not just the great tasks of whaling, mourning, parenting, marriage for which worship prepares us. It can also prepare people for leadership and service at the highest levels.

A few days after the election this past fall, I received a piece of writing from a member of our church who is much closer to these matters than I am. He had lived through the divisiveness of the election as we all had, and after the results, was moved to write the following:

² These words are taken from a baptismal liturgy in the Presbyterian Church USA.

³ These words are found in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* of 1946.

⁴ These words come from the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, of 1946.

...before the majestic sweep of the inaugural ceremony, in the small, cramped sanctuary of St. John's [Episcopal Church across from the White House] we set aside time for a quiet, private service of *worship*. As ministers, priests, rabbis, imams, and holy elders of all faiths offer prayers for the nation and its leadership, for wisdom and discernment, for moral and physical strength, for mercy and protection, we unofficially yet collectively seek *heavenly blessing* on the leader chosen by the people for this extraordinarily difficult and messy job....The President-elect...has *no speaking...role* in this service, he (or in the future, she) just *sits* and *listens*...Within the confined space of St. John's, even before having taken the formal oath of office, a president's obligations as our leader and a nation's hope for his success are *sealed by the prayers of the people* he serves.

For people of faith, worship is crucial in *accepting* and *preparing* for a great responsibility.

III.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus appears to his eleven remaining disciples in Galilee, and he immediately charges them with what we call the *Great Commission*.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, [Jesus says]. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Immediately *before* receiving this commission, the disciples have *seen* the risen Lord for the first time since they had abandoned him at the time of his arrest.⁵ But when they see him, there is a *brief pause* between *their seeing him* and *his commissioning them*. In this pause, in these few seconds between *sight* and *commission*, Matthew writes three crucial words: "*they worshipped him...*"

Between *resurrection* and *commissioning* is worship. Before the Great Commission comes *worship*.

IV.

I know it is not unusual on Easter Sunday for the minister to try to explain what the resurrection of Christ might or might not be. I've engaged in such attempts at explanation myself.

- Is the resurrection of Christ the soul leaving Jesus' body behind and going to heaven? *No, it's not that, for there's a body involved in resurrection.*
- Is the resurrection of Jesus the resuscitation of a corpse in which Jesus comes back to life just as he was before his death? *No, that that either, because nobody seems to recognize him immediately⁶ and he passes through doors without opening them.⁷ His bodily form has changed.*
- How about the power of Jesus living on through the way he inspired his disciples to spread the Gospel, to put their own lives on the line, to turn the world upside down, to become one of the world's great religions and a foundation of Western Civilization? *Partially, but the resurrection was more than Jesus "living" through the influence he would exercise throughout history.*

⁵ Matthew 26:56.

⁶ John 20:14; John 21:4; Luke 24:16, 37.

⁷ John 19:19, 26.

The truth is: The resurrection of Jesus Christ cannot be explained in the *historical* or *scientific* terms we have at our disposal. The resurrection of Christ is something entirely new and different in history, something from above, a new creation, a victory on the part of God over death, an eschatological event shaking the very stones of the earth and overpowering the cosmos in which it occurs (if “occur” is even the right verb). As our music bore witness last week, the resurrection is the destruction of death.

But above all, in our terms, the resurrection lies beyond our ability to understand or describe. None of the four gospel writers attempt to describe it. They simply narrate empty tomb and appearances by the risen Christ. The Apostle Paul labels the resurrection a “mystery” and describes the form in which Jesus is raised “a spiritual body” (Is it “body”? Is it “spirit”? Who knows?)⁸

The focus of the Biblical witness – in narrative, theological discourse and poetry – is not on scientific or historical *explanations* of the resurrection. Rather the focus is on the *power of God* behind it and the *human response* to it. And that response begins with *worship*: “When they saw him, they worshipped him...”

The only real way we can respond to the resurrection of Christ is to fall down and worship. We worship the God more powerful than us. We worship the Christ who is enthroned on the only throne that matters. We worship the Spirit who calls into question the earthly power we are often lulled or tempted into thinking we desire. We worship the One who commissions us to serve him with our whole lives, the greatest commission one could receive.

Before the Great Commission comes worship. Worship is the way we respond. Worship is the way we prepare.

V.

In addition to leading worship in which you accept your commissions to parent, marry, mourn and honor, those of us who sit in this chancel get to *observe* the commissions you accept beyond this sanctuary:

- The commission to provide daily care for another human being who cannot care for themselves
- The commission to be the one in a large extended family to whom others turn when a need arises, when succor is needed, when wise counsel is in order, when another view of the world needs to be expressed and heard
- The commission to age gracefully and responsibly

We get to observe you accept:

- The commission to accept that a disease has entered your body, to treat it aggressively and wisely, to face the outcome with courage when the outcome is not hopeful
- The commission to grieve the loss of someone dear

And we get to observe the commissions you accept vocationally:

- The commission to serve the citizens of this community, our nation, the world of which our nation is so crucially part, through

⁸ First Corinthians 15.

- Military service or diplomatic corps
- Civil service
- Elected office
- Journalism
- Philanthropy
- The arts
- Education
- Politics
- The helping professions
- Business and industry
- Political action of all sorts.

And together we observe the commission we have accepted *as a church*:

- To preach and teach and live out the gospel in, through
 - Providing life and education to orphans in Kenya
 - Repairing homes and Alexandria and Appalachia
 - Providing Meals on Wheels to those whose only wheels are on walkers on which they lean as they open the door for us in our delivering,
 - Providing scholarships and Sunday School for Native Americans at Spirit Lake, North Dakota.

We are all commissioned by the risen Christ – individually and as a congregation – and our commissions are often greater – much greater – than we perceive them to be.

VI.

In Melville’s second most famous work, *Billy Budd* is a young sailor who faces death at sea for a crime he has not committed but in service to a chain of command he affirms.⁹ A few hours before his death a chaplain visits Billy in his cell. Billy is polite and respectful to the chaplain, but the chaplain soon realizes that his efforts to “bring home to [Billy] the thought of salvation and a Savior” is something Billy is not ready to “appropriate.” The chaplain describes his offer as being “like a gift placed in the palm of an outreached hand upon which the fingers do not close.”¹⁰

For each of us in this room, Christ has a Great Commission. If you are able, like Billy Budd, accept your commission and fulfill it “without closing the fingers of your hand around the gift” of a Savior with which it comes, then we, like readers of *Billy Budd*, will admire and applaud and support your heroism. Part of our support will be prayer.

If, on the other hand, you have seen ever so faintly a glimpse of the risen Christ – a mystery you neither *claim* nor *have* to understand – and are hearing – again ever so faintly – a commission Christ is issuing you, I urge you: “close the fingers of your hand around the gift” of a Savior, and as you are “bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific,...fail [not] to make a Sunday visit to [the Whaleman’s Chapel].”

Amen.

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⁹ Herman Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative),” in *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), pages 243-329. The story was written in 1891, left uncompleted, and first published in 1924.

¹⁰ “Billy Budd,” 317.