

June 4, 2023  
Matthew 28:16-20

Holy Trinity  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Pep Talk”

“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 ...”

*“Sawyer, you’re going out a youngster, but you’ve got to come back a star!”*

The musical *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* gives us the story of Peggy Sawyer, a wide-eyed girl from Pennsylvania who shows up in New York City with dreams of becoming a star in a Broadway musical. After several failed auditions, she lands a role as a chorus girl in a musical directed by Julian Marsh, a hot-shot director who has gone broke thanks to the recent stock market crash. Everything is riding on this musical being a success for Julian, since it’s his last chance to make enough money so that he doesn’t die a broke old man. When his leading lady breaks an ankle, Julian is forced to put Peggy in her place, even though she is inexperienced and very unsure of herself. At the critical juncture in the musical, Marsh gives Peggy his famous pep talk which gives her the inspiration to step on the stage and become a star, launching her career on the Broadway stage while giving Marsh the hit he needs to save his career.

Pep talks that change the course of the story are a common device in many plays, movies, and stories. One of the most famous is in *Knute Rockne: All American*, in which the famous Notre Dame football coach encourages his team to “*go out there and win one for the Gipper*,” their injured teammate George Gipp. When the rebel alliance is about to go into battle against the Evil Empire’s Death Star in the original *Star Wars* movie, they are given a pep talk reminding them of what is at stake in this moment, and through the guidance of Obi-Wan Kenobi’s voice Luke Skywalker is able to direct his shot into the exact spot that destroys the Empire’s battle station. In our own lives, there may have been moments when someone took us aside and gave us a pep talk at a moment of uncertainty and anxiety, giving us the strength and courage to accomplish what at first appeared to be impossible. As Peggy Sawyer is given the confidence to declare “*I’ll do it!*” in response to the pep talk she receives from Julian Marsh, we may also have times in which we were energized by the encouragement of others to face our fears and doubts and accomplish a task that had seemed far beyond our capabilities of accomplishing.

Today’s Gospel lesson is from the conclusion of the Gospel According to Matthew, in which the Risen Lord Jesus Christ appears to his disciples for the last time. This

is the first scene in Matthew in which the disciples have appeared since they fled during the arrest of Jesus (“*Then all the disciples deserted him and fled*” – 26:56). Presumably they remained in Jerusalem until they received the announcement of the women in Jesus’ words that they were to “*go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*” (28:10); based on this announcement, they returned to the mountain that Jesus had appointed for their post-resurrection rendezvous (“*But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee*” (26:32). The disciples have thus come to faith in the risen Jesus and the reconciling message that they are again/still his brothers. The basis for this faith is not the appearance of Jesus to them, but the testimony of the women, which they have accepted. The “*mountain to which Jesus had directed them*” (28:16) corresponds to the mountains that in Matthew have theological rather than geographical significance:

- “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” – 5:1.
- “Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.” – 17:1.

Galilee, which was the launching point for the Messiah’s mission to Israel, is now to become the take-off point for the mission to the whole world. When the disciples see Jesus on this Galilean mountain, their response is not amazement, fascination, or curiosity; like the women who first encountered the Risen Lord (28:9), “*they worshiped him*” (28:17). Matthew also reports that while they reacted to Jesus’ presence in worship, “*some doubted.*” This may correspond to John’s account of Thomas’ reaction when the other disciples report that they have seen the Lord, his insistence that “*unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hands in his side, I will not believe*” (John 20:25) and Jesus’ invitation to Thomas to “*put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*” (20:27). But while our translation implies that only a few of the disciples doubted, another translation indicated that “*they worshiped him, but they doubted*”; the disciples worshiped and doubted at the same time. “Doubt” (*distazo*) is not theoretical skepticism, “*but the risky wavering of the one who must decide when more than one possibility seems reasonable and right.*” (M. Eugene Boring). “Doubt” is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in Matthew 14:31, when Jesus saves Peter from drowning after and then asks his disciple “*you of little faith, why did you doubt?*” In one sense, the report of the doubting of the disciples is a reminder that “*it is not to angels or perfect believers, but to the worshipping/wavering community of disciples whom the world mission is entrusted.*” (Boring).

The doubt of the disciples may not be directed solely to their experience of being in the presence of the Risen Lord; they may also be filled with self-doubt at this moment. Matthew reports that *“the eleven disciples went to Galilee”*; the twelfth, Judas Iscariot, was the one who betrayed Jesus and later committed suicide. Having been shaken by their fellow disciples’ heinous act of betrayal, the remaining disciples may still be traumatized and doubting whether they too might succumb to such a temptation to betray Jesus. The doubt they are experiencing may be doubt that they will be able to accomplish that to which Jesus will entrust them as apostles who will be sent out to continue to proclaim the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ. It may be to this group of disciples who are doubting themselves that the Risen Lord speaks:

- “The setting is a mountain in Galilee, and the occasion is Jesus’ great commission: the sending out of the disciples to preach the gospel to all nations. The group of disciples has mixed feelings: some still have doubts, but some worship him. Besides, it is a group that has been shaken and broken by Judas’ treason. A pep talk is in order.” – Osvaldo Vena.

As at the Transfiguration, Jesus comes to his disciples (*“But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’”* – 17:7). While typically the disciples are the one who come to Jesus, our Lord comes to them in their moment of doubt to give them the strength and encouragement that they do not possess in themselves. His first words to his disciples are a declaration that *“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* (28:18). Jesus’ declaration of “authority” (*exusia*) recalls the declaration in Daniel where the “Son of Man,” a heavenly figure who represents the persecuted people of Israel, is given *“dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him”* (Daniel 7:14). While “authority” is often understood as power that one person has over another, in Matthew “authority” is always used in connection with Jesus’ acts of healing and forgiveness. People celebrate Jesus’ deeds and words because they recognize that he is acting not authoritatively but with authority, not to be served but to serve:

- “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” – 7:29.
- “When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.” – 9:8.
- “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” – 11:27.

Matthew pictures the Risen Lord as the one who is Lord of heaven and earth, the one who is *“the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”* (Colossians 1:18). Speaking as one with authority to use this authority to serve others as their Lord and Saviour, Jesus now speaks with this same authority as he commissions his disciple to *“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.”* (28:19-20a). The commission is to all the “nations” (*ethne*, “Gentiles”); while Jesus’ ministry began among his own people, as the one who is Lord of all he sends his disciples out to proclaim the good news *“to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). They are commissioned not only to proclaim the Gospel but to “make disciples.” After the resurrection, the invitation to discipleship is open to all people of all nations. People are not called to become individual believers but are to be enlisted as disciples within the Christian community, whose reception of the Christian message in faith must be revitalized in their lives. The entire world is declared a mission field its diverse peoples and communities being the “many for whom Jesus shed his blood (*“Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”* – 26:27b-28). The call to discipleship is an extension of the call to Abraham and the promise that *“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Genesis 12:3). The call to Christian discipleship is a call to a total way of life, a commitment to pattern one’s daily actions and decisions after the example of Jesus and his most heroic followers. It is a call to obedience, to live in accordance with the teaching of Jesus and in the example he set as the one who came *“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for others”* (Mark 10:45).

- “Obedience to everything that Jesus has commanded them is more than accepting a certain dogma or doctrine. It is a call to pursue a style of life that is based on love and justice, a command to be doers of the word that Jesus has spoken from God, and not simply hearers.” – Vena.

The means through which Jesus’ followers will make “disciples of all nations” is through *“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* While Jesus’ ministry began with his baptism by John in the Jordan River, a *“baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Luke 3:3), Jesus institutes a new sacrament in this command to his disciples. In our Lutheran understanding of the sacraments, the command of Jesus is the first requirement in making an act a means of grace to which our Lord requires us to practice as his disciple community (in the other sacrament, the Lord’s Supper, it is our Lord’s command to *“do this in*

*remembrance of me*” (1 Corinthians 11:24) that fulfills this requirement). Baptism is the act marking the transition from being outside the Christian community to discipleship within it. Baptism in the name of the triune God emphasizes that we are being incorporated into a community that believes that God has been revealed to us as “*three persons, blessed Trinity,*” and that “*the one encountered in Jesus as the Son of God and in the Spirit-led church as the people of God is not some subordinate deity, but the one true God*” (Boring). The disciples, and the community of disciples of every generation, is commissioned to baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity so that we may have the assurance that in Holy Baptism “*we are reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*” (ELW Holy Baptism).

- “And since we are baptized into these names and are consecrated and hallowed by them, and since they have thus become our names, it follows that God’s children should be called and also be gentle, merciful, chaste, just, truthful, guileless, friendly, peaceful, and kindly disposed toward all, even toward our enemies. For the name of God, in which we are baptized, works all this in us.” – Martin Luther, 1519.

After baptizing disciples, the Christian community is to instruct them in all that Jesus has taught them. Jesus had taught in his Sermon on the Mount that his teaching fulfills the Word of God in the law and prophets (5:17), is the sole content of the disciples’ teaching, and will be the sole criterion on the last day. The importance of hearing Jesus’ words and putting them into practice are here confirmed; this is the foundation of the church’s teaching ministry throughout all generations, the basis for the mandate that those who bring children to the waters of Holy Baptism and the community into which they are baptized teach their children what it means to be a Christian “*so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.*” (ELW Holy Baptism).

- “Baptism still involves people in the whole body of Christ. It may mean participation in the routines of a parish, suffering under a nameless burden, carrying on in unaesthetic and personally distasteful surroundings, loving the unlikeable, accepting the unacceptable. But the test remains in the concreteness and visibility that the new life daily takes. Those who rise from the baptismal waters delivered and cleansed now carry the wounds of Christ in the midst of the world so that his glory may shine forth.” – Martin Marty.

Unlike Luke's accounts of the ascension of Jesus (Luke 24:51, Acts 1:9), there is no account of an ascension at the end of Matthew. Instead, this Gospel ends with Jesus' words of encouragement to his disciples to "*remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" (28:20). Jesus' last words are a promise of his continuing presence as the one who was born *Emmanuel*, "God is with us," and of his continuing presence with his disciples as they continue his mission of making disciples of all nations. They receive the promise of Jesus' abiding presence as they are given a "pep talk" to encourage them to continue Jesus' mission and ministry in the knowledge that the Lord will be with them to bless them, empower them, encourage them, and give them the ability to "*accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

- "Disciples who had not believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. When they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. When they laid their hands upon the sick, it was as if Jesus himself had touched them. In short order, they were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it ... It was time for God to be born again – not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gifts." – Barbara Brown Taylor.

There are moments in which we may be filled with self-doubt, wondering if we have the knowledge or skills to accomplish a task that is set before us. At moments such as these, a pep talk can make all the difference, encouraging us to trust in our own abilities and in our worthiness to accomplish what may at first seem daunting. As our Lord encourages this group of self-doubting disciples that they are indeed the community that will continue Jesus' work of making disciples of all nations, the Word of God speaks to us in this generation as a word of encouragement that even an imperfect group of believers such as ourselves have been entrusted with the treasure of God's Holy Word and encouraged to believe that "*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all without reserve, and spread God's liberating word.*" (ELW Hymn 729). As Peggy Sawyer received encouragement to "come back a star," may we hear our Lord's word of encouragement to us that in the power of the Spirit we can continue to be the church that will continue to shine the light of Christ's love in a world filled with darkness and to share the good news of Jesus Christ so that all people may know the steadfast love of God that abides with us always in our Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.