

Matthew 28:16-20  
**“Be the Church: Focus on Mission”**  
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA  
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, 2022

*The Reading: Matthew 28:16-20 – The Message Bible*

*<sup>16-17</sup> 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.*

*<sup>18-20</sup> 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.”*

I do a little coaching work with pastors and churches on the side, one or two congregations a year, through an organization called Hope Partnership.<sup>1</sup> In one of these coaching relationships, there was an outspoken lay leader named Harvey; he didn’t think that his congregation needed to bring in an outsider to advise them how to be First Christian Church. “I don’t think we need to change anything. We just need to get more members. We don’t need to bring in a bunch of strangers from the community and mess up the building. We just need to continue on as we always have and take care of the members.”

**It is easy for faith groups to focus upon their own members.** Certainly, we need to care for our fellow church members, but just like clubs, schools, businesses, and other human organizations, congregations can become near-sighted, ignore needs around them, and turn inward. They can lose their altruism and fall into habits of thinking and behavior that blind them to new people and especially to those that are different from them. In some ways the pandemic has compounded this tendency to inward focus.

I knew a congregation that hosted their coffee hour in the church basement, for example, far away from the worship space. No visitors ever joined them because they didn’t know how to get to the right spot, and if they did make it there, the old timers weren’t at all welcoming! Their numbers dwindled to just two or three standing in the dark corner of that cellar, around an old-style coffee pot, because church had become *all about them*.

As I studied this familiar passage from the end of Matthew, it occurred to me **how easy it would have been for the disciples of Jesus to focus upon themselves after his resurrection.** I can imagine them deciding: “Now that he’s alive, let’s just lay low and enjoy being with him. We don’t need any more drama! We can stay plenty busy looking

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.hopeecu.org>

after each other.” The Eleven, plus the women, could have had their hands full planning worship services. Maybe they would buy some property, remember the past, and occasionally go to the empty tomb. “Why risk bringing in new members? Let’s not try to change society either. That’s a lost cause. Let’s just be *us!*”

**But the risen Christ led them *away* from what they were used to in Jerusalem and *up* to a high mountain. Why? So that they could focus on mission in the world.**

Looking out over the great expanse and to the furthest horizon, the living Jesus instructed them to “Go, disciple, baptize, teach, serve, change, and change the world. I am with you, here, there, everywhere, always.”

***This is when they became church!*** “Protect the environment. Care for the poor. Forgive often. Reject racism. Fight for the powerless. Share earthly and spiritual resources. Embrace diversity. Love God. Enjoy this life. Stretch as the Body of Christ. Focus on Mission.”

**Today, when you and I become preoccupied with our own members, we can expect that somehow the risen Christ will lead us up to ‘the mountain’ so that we can see and focus upon mission as church.**

For instance, this has happened to me over and over again, but in one situation, it was when James Forbes, once the minister of Riverside Church in New York City spoke to a group of ministers at a worship conference. He certainly challenged *me* when he declared that if a congregation is reaching out and growing, and especially if it is becoming more multicultural, its members ought to expect to be comfortable with only 70% of what happens in the worship service. The other 30% should stretch them.

In another example, when my family relocated to the Pacific Northwest from North Carolina, I recall what a dramatic experience it was to go up and then cross the Cascade mountains, and afterward, to see the Seattle skyline laid out before us. It was as if Jesus had led me there to that higher spot to focus me anew on the mission and ministry that we would do together as University Christian Church.

We accomplished a lot together as church and pastor there, but fifteen years after I left, that congregation closed. The building was torn down and the property sold, but its mission continued. The assets seeded the University Christian Legacy Foundation, which in turn, funded Arbora Court, 133 apartments of affordable housing, as well as other mission causes that support children, youth, and families that have experienced trauma and homelessness. It’s as if Jesus led this church through death to become a mission church in an even greater way!

Wendell Berry, the poet, expresses it well: “Every day you have less reason not to give yourself away!”<sup>2</sup>

RCC, Jesus is always with us, and always leading us up to a higher place whenever we settle for how things are. Has this interim been like a mountain climb by which we now see things differently and more clearly? I hope so. Will the pandemic and cultural events actually turn out to have been a blessing that pushes us more into mission?

If you let Jesus lead your meetings and decision-making, you will ask of any activity or new endeavor: “How can we invite and involve *others*, not just our current members? “How can we work with partners instead of by ourselves?” and “Does this new

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<sup>2</sup>Wendell Berry, 1993, #1, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Washington, D. C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 167.

idea for ministry match where God is calling us?” Having led you to the mountain, then Jesus, you, and Pastor Chip will be able to climb in that direction.