

# He didn't stay dead!

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*Sermon on Matthew 28*

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As the introduction tells you, this is an unusual, if not unique, event. Chapel services are not unique, you do that three times a week as an integral part of your Judson education. But already that puts you in a rare group, for almost all college students move through their week without receiving from their school any direction for the spiritual dimension of their lives. Once all universities did this, and the university itself was born out of the church. Only a few religious schools now carry on this original approach. No, what is unique about chapel services at Judson this week is that your three preachers come from different Christian communities. I think I speak for the other preachers when I say that value of this Christian unity week of chapel sermons lies is recognizing that Christian fraternity extends beyond one's own community's boundaries and that in the increasingly hostile, secular environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, Christians of different communities have found sufficient agreement between us to collaborate in mission, even as we continue to engage one another theologically about significant disagreements.

Now, I'm not here to tell you about the Catholic Church. I'm here to preach to you about a biblical text, which, of course, I will do out of my experience of knowing and living with Jesus in the Catholic Church. The purpose of our time together today in

chapel is to intensify our relationship with Jesus Christ. This should be the goal of every preacher who stands in this pulpit, and every member of the Judson community who sits in this assembly. It will certainly be my goal, just as it was the goal of Dr. John Armstrong on Monday and will be the goal of Fr. Wilbur Ellsworth, who will be preaching on Friday. What will be the same is that all three of us are followers of ecumenical orthodoxy. What this means is that Dr. Armstrong, Fr. Ellsworth and I all hold that the ancient creeds are the rule of faith which determines the boundaries of biblical interpretation. What will be different having a Catholic Christian priest or an Orthodox Christian priest is the vantage point from which we read the text.

As a Catholic Christian, that vantage point sees the means of grace as primary in bringing salvation to the world. This is what theologians call the *sacramental principle*. The means of grace refers to the whole of revealed truth (in other words, the Faith), the sacraments or ordinances, and the ordained ministry. The means also include prayer, fellowship and charity.<sup>1</sup> Just as human nature itself was transformed and divinized by the incarnation of the Son of God, so to, natural elements: water, oil, bread and wine, and human beings with their language and culture, can be transformed and become the effective means for divine grace to operate in our world. So, in a nutshell, that's the vantage point from which I am viewing the text.

Now, the Catholic Church is a big church. There are 1.2 billion of us. Still, there is a lot of variety among us. The part of Catholicism which my school comes from is animated by a vision of the Church turned toward the world and engaging the world

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992). Par. 1076.

for the sake of mission. The vision of this missional stance towards the world is found in the teachings of Pope Saint John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Pope Saint John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and now, Pope Francis.

So, the text I chose is Matthew 28:18-20. [let's listen to that now. If you have your bibles with you, read along. This will be from a Catholic translation:

18. et accedens Iesus locutus est  
eis dicens data est mihi omnis potestas  
in caelo et in terra.  
19. euntes ergo docete omnes gentes  
baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti,  
20. docentes eos servare omnia quaecumque mandavi vobis  
et ecce ego vobiscum sum omnibus diebus usque ad consummationem saeculi

18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

I read the text in Latin not to show you that I can read that language, and certainly not to suggest that we read it that way in church on Sunday, because except for about six parishes in all of Chicagoland, we don't. No, I did it to make an important point about mission. Unlike other religions, for example, Islam, Christianity does not have a sacred language, only *original* languages. What this means is that the Bible can be translated and still remain fully the Bible. If the eternal Word of God could become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, then the inspired Word can be embodied in every language. This is how Christianity can be a universal religion. Being a universal religion, i.e., one for all the nations, is the task of Christians committed to mission. That's why Saint Jerome spent years praying, living an ascetic life, and working to translate the Bible from

Hebrew and Greek (the original languages), into Latin, which was the language of the Roman Empire.

Now, let me be clear about this. Jerome was planning a revolution. In that small room in Bethlehem, underneath the Church of the Nativity where he spent all those years, he was not engaged in a literary exercise. He was plotting the overthrow of the greatest empire the world had seen. Saint Gregory the Illuminator did this for the Armenians, and later Saint Cyril would do it for the Slavs, and so would many others. The first step is that missionaries must go to a people and learn their languages and culture in order to bring the Gospel in a way they can understand. From that effort, the Word of God becomes embodied in a culture through religious life, language and society.

The gospel is not an idea. Evangelism is altogether different from propaganda. I am not here to propagate an idea. I'm here to tell you about a person. This person is unique. This person is deeply troubling to a lot of folks in our society. In fact, if you listen to the stories of people who came into relationship with him over the last 20 years, you will find something very different from 40 or 50 years ago.

You see 40 or 50 years ago, the world was indifferent to him. Now, today, in your world, the dominant attitude is hostility. You're college students. You know that your peer group takes diversity and equality as overarching goods. You know that tolerance and acceptance are among the highest values of your generation. Tolerance extends to all identities and worldviews, until you mention Christianity or the name of Jesus. Because of Christianity's exclusive claims, in an instant you are branded a hater.

Why is this? I would argue that the current mindset does not, in fact, embrace the virtue of tolerance, but rather an ideology of relativism. And relativism is, at its very root, intolerant of any exclusive claim. The reason I argue this way is that I have listened to conversion stories over the past 10 years and I hear a common thread. That thread was that for these people who prized tolerance, the very idea of Christianity could not be considered. But that's not a problem for us, as we are not selling an idea. Rather, like Jerome, we're planning a revolution. I'll have some more to say about what this will mean for society toward the end of this sermon. But for right now, I want to focus on several steps before that.

Here is where my different vantage point as a Catholic Christian may become apparent. When I preach Matthew 28, I see three very specific aspects to mission. Now, just to be clear, I meant it when I said that Christianity is a universal religion. I think that the goal of mission is that every single person on the planet be offered the opportunity to be associated with the paschal mystery.<sup>1</sup> Pope Saint John Paul II saw this happening in three stages: proclaim the Gospel with the aim of conversion; baptize and form Christian community; and promote gospel values for the transformation of culture. This comprehensive vision of mission is quite a lot more than simply getting someone to pray the sinner's prayer. It is, however, a vision which is highly appealing to your generation. And in those places where this vision is actualized, Christianity is

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<sup>1</sup>See *Dominus Jesus*, 12, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22 and *Dominum et Vivificantem*

growing the fastest. And in those same places, the average age of a Christian is 26. Let me touch on each one of these stages.

## **Proclaim the gospel with the aim of conversion**

If we are to fulfill the prescriptions of Matthew 28, we first have to have the goal of preaching the gospel with the aim of conversion. Saint Francis is reported to have said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, you may use words."<sup>2</sup>

But sometimes I wonder if we are clearly able to answer the question, "what is the gospel?" Well, I'll give you a simple version. The gospel is, with apologies to the late Douglas Adams, "the answer to life, the universe and everything."<sup>3</sup> But, you may ask, what's the question? Let me take you to Sweden, April 6, 2014, when 92 year old Stig Kernell made headlines across the world by dying. Now, Mr. Kernell was not a famous man, until the funeral home published the obituary which Stig himself wrote. It was three words long. He wrote: "I am dead." Part humor and part statement that at 92, he wasn't afraid of death, Stig became an overnight sensation. Those three words got him his fifteen minutes of fame.

Now, I can do the same for the gospel, and say it in four words. But if you really take in what the four words mean, the fame of the one to whom they refer has lasted a

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<sup>2</sup> This text actually does not appear in the *Omnibus of Sources* which is the authoritative guide to Franciscan studies. However, the phrase is ubiquitous in Franciscan formation and life, and therefore an authentic expression of Francis' ethos.

<sup>3</sup> See Douglas Adams, *Life, the Universe and Everything* (being the third book of the five book Trilogy) in *The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide* (New York: Wings Books, 1996).

bit longer than 15 minutes. Since Saint Francis wants me to be very sparing with the use of words in preaching, here they are. If the one thing we can say about Stig Kernall is “he is dead,” the one thing we can say about Jesus is this: “He didn’t stay dead.”

Christianity’s revolution is simply this: If Jesus overcame death, then everything in this life, which we base on a horizon of death, is misguided. If death is the destination, it’s like using a GPS which is programmed to always use interstate highways and which will take you far out of your way because it cannot consider the straight path.

The acceptance of the Gospel, however, reprograms your life to a destination beyond the horizon of death. That destination requires you to follow the Lord along a very specific route. The conversion preached is not merely an intellectual ascent to some theological proposition, but the acceptance of a relationship with Jesus as the guiding and governing Lord of your whole life, private, professional and public. The acceptance of the gospel is the beginning, not the end of discipleship. Moreover, this is a discipleship that continues beyond the horizon of death into the eternal kingdom of God. Jesus has revealed some very specific gifts by which he extends his presence to his disciples, until he comes again.

## **Baptize and form Christian community**

To understand these gifts, let me read another passage of scripture. Turn if you wish to Acts 2:42. This verse occurs right after the earliest account of apostolic

preaching. Peter has just preached to the crowds and three thousand have responded to his preaching. This verse tells us what they did next.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.<sup>4</sup>

This text presents us with the picture of a quite radical change through life in the Spirit. Embedded in that section of the text is the verse I mentioned, Acts 2:42, "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."<sup>5</sup> A more literal interpretation would be "and they adhered to that which was taught by the apostles, and the communal participation, and the breaking of the bread and the communal prayers." I get to this interpretation by looking at the fuller meaning of the words of the Greek text. What is really happening here is that Peter's hearers, in their conversion to

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:41-47 (RSVCE)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Jesus, are leaving one community and entering another. And that new community is infused with certain gifts of the Spirit which will prolong and deepen their conversion.

Remember my vantage point of the means of grace. First and foremost, this new community has the teaching, the doctrine of the Apostles, who are personally pastoring the new Christians. I shifted the word “fellowship” to “communal participation” because in our culture fellowship implies something created by individuals. Since the Christian community is something you are initiated into, communal participation seems a more accurate usage. It exists prior to your conversion, and it welcomes you into its life. The ‘breaking of the bread’ is code in the New Testament for the Lord’s Supper, which can only be understood in light of Jewish table fellowship which implied a covenant community.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I have rendered “the prayers” as the “communal prayers” because the Greek term is interchangeable with “synagogue” which is the place of the daily *minyon* (or representative congregational prayer). In the New Testament, we can reduce the twelve men required for the daily *minyon* to “where two or three are gathered in [the Name of Jesus]. But it is important for us to understand that the entire section from Acts is about leaving one community and being initiated into another.

Christian community, then, is at the heart of how I understand mission. The community forms and sends missionaries. The missionaries baptize and form new Christian communities. The cycle continues. And since I am at a Baptist school, I

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<sup>6</sup> See Russell Moore, I. John Hesselink, Thomas A. Baima and David P. Scaer, *Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper*, eds. John H. Armstrong and Paul Engle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

should say at least a few words about baptism. There is one sentence in the recent document of the Baptist/Catholic International Conversation which I find helps us get at an important truth. The theologians write: "Initiation into Christ and his church is a process wider than the act of baptism itself. We can work towards a mutual recognition of the different forms that initiation takes among us, as an entire 'journey' of faith and grace."<sup>7</sup> Here we find the rationale for why baptizing and forming Christian community are essential to the actualization of Jesus' command in Matthew 28. Initiation into Christ, which includes initiation into the whole Christ present in his Body, involves a journey of faith and grace. Conversion is, at once, a specific moment and a long process. Ultimately, though, I am making the case that conversion is from one community to another. For the new believers we read about in Acts 2, it was from the Jewish synagogue to the Christian *ekklesia*.<sup>8</sup> Today, and for your generation in particular, it's conversion from a secularized and often broken society to the Church, a community transformed by gospel values. Forming Christian community is essential as many new believers need care and healing as the first order of business.<sup>9</sup> They need the body of Christ to accompany them on the journey of faith and grace. But the story of mission does not stop there.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between The Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006-2010*, in *Information Service* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), par. 101.

<sup>8</sup> *Ekklesia* is the Greek word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *qahal*.

<sup>9</sup> See Don Everts and Doug Schaup, *I Once Was Lost: What Post-Modern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008).

## Promote gospel values for the transformation culture<sup>10</sup>

I mentioned earlier that Jerome was planning a revolution when he translated the Bible into the vernacular. The final thing I want to say about mission is what that there was a cultural dimension to the revolution. Preaching the gospel to all nations really meant that the Church was to convert the world as whole nations. The final dimension, then, is that mission does not only include individual conversions, but cultural conversion as a simultaneous agenda. The Church engages in twin expressions of the Great Commission, the evangelization of peoples and the transformation of cultures through the spread of gospel values.<sup>11</sup>

The great American Catholic theologian, Avery Dulles, the son of John Foster Dulles, remarked that what caused the Church to grow so dramatically in the Roman Empire was that it stood as a contrast society, where the virtue of its members was so clearly at odds with the dominant and decadent culture that it possessed an attractive power.<sup>12</sup> To explain this, turn if you would to 2 Timothy 2. “The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him; . . . if we are faithless, *he remains faithful*--for he cannot deny himself.”<sup>13</sup> The attractive power of faithfulness is the key.

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<sup>10</sup> See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), par. 21.

<sup>11</sup> See Thomas A. Baima, *What is a Parish? Canonical, Pastoral and Theological Perspectives* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2011), 199.

<sup>12</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Expanded Edition (New York: Image Books, 2000), 195-219.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Tim 2:11-13.

Faithfulness to the gospel has the power to humanize culture. What I mean by this is that because Christ is the new Adam, the perfect human being, human nature can be elevated by the gospel. Even among non-believers, the gospel has the power to effect changes in a culture. Even among non-believers, there is the possibility of virtue being fostered and society changed.

The first conversion we seek in this transformation of culture is the promotion of the dignity of the human person. This is not a consequence of the gospel, it is part of the Gospel itself. After all, John tells us, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . ." <sup>14</sup> By doing so, divinity united with humanity and changed humanity in the process. This leads almost directly to a sense of the solidarity of the human community as the second of the fundamental values.

The transformation of culture is a bit harder to grasp at first, but it is really nothing other than the purification of a culture by the Gospel of all elements which are foreign to truth. We believe that the Holy Spirit has planted "seeds of the Word" in every culture to prepare it for the gospel. Through dialogue with the gospel, these "seeds of the Word" can be brought to full stature and such a culture is more open to evangelization. Being more in harmony with the natural law, such a culture will be better able to mediate the salvific work of Christ through the Spirit, even to those who do not know him. <sup>15</sup> This idea of "seeds of the Word" comes from Irenaeus, who also wrote "Where the church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is,

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<sup>14</sup> John 1:14

<sup>15</sup> Romans 2:14-15

there is the church, and every kind of grace."<sup>16</sup> The transformation of culture is both an element of the process of conversion and initiation, and a distinct activity of the Church.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

I started this address by saying its purpose was to intensify your relationship with Jesus Christ. I promised that I'd offer my reflection from the vantage point of a Catholic Christian who sees the means of grace as central to the salvation of the world. And I offered the example of Jerome on how to plan a revolution in society. I gave you three steps for accomplishing a modern day revolution: proclaiming the gospel with the aim of conversation; baptizing and forming Christian communities; and promoting the transformation of culture through the gospel values of the dignity of the human person and the solidarity of human community.

My punch line in all of this is something my bishop, Francis Cardinal George, said many years ago. He said, "the church does not have a mission. The mission has a church." I've been talking for about 30 minutes here, and if, by chance, you have mentally left the conversation, come back for this. *The Church does not have a mission. The Mission has a Church.* If you get that line, you really get Matthew 28. You see Jesus established Peter and the apostles with the gifts necessary to fulfill the Great Commission. Those gifts, those means of grace, which we hear about in Acts 2:42, the

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<sup>16</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 156.

<sup>17</sup> Baima, Op. Cit., 200.

teaching of the apostles, the fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers, are each and all necessary to achieve what Jesus asked us to do. And we do not have to depend on our doing, for even if we are faithless, Jesus remains faithful. Through the means of grace, he insures that we will have what we need to succeed.

As you seek to apply this message to your Christian lives, I'd like you to talk about two things with your friends. First, I mentioned that for your generation, the values of tolerance and acceptance are considered the highest values. I would submit that if you want to purify this culture of its errors, you must help your friends see that tolerance and acceptance are not strong enough for the revolution we are speaking of. Instead, we need the robust values of the dignity of the human person and the solidarity of the human community. These universal and comprehensive values offer much more than mere tolerance and acceptance. You don't want people to tolerate you. You want people to recognize that you have dignity. This is how the gospel can purify culture. This is how you make Christianity credible with your non-believing friends.

Secondly, I want you to talk with your friends about mission and church. Write that phrase I gave you *the church does not have a mission, the mission has a church* on a little card and put it in your Bible, and when you are reading the Scriptures, glance at it and let it open some new perspectives to you in your reading. But most of all, as a member of the body of Christ, ask yourself what this insight could mean to you personally. Ask how you might better use the means of grace to intensify your relationship with Jesus Christ. The gospel is simple: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Because he didn't stay dead, he could command a mission and enable its

accomplishment by sending the Holy Spirit to empower the Church with the means of grace as we read in Acts 2:42.

Let me end by thanking Christopher Lash, the director of University Ministries for the invitation to preach to you today. I also want to acknowledge Dr. Warren Anderson, the dean of the chapel, Aaron Niequist, who led us in worship, and, of course Dr. John Armstrong, my friend, co-author and public interlocutor on Catholic & Evangelical matters. Dr. Armstrong and I have done a number of public programs with each other and while we have been in panel discussions, one-on-one dialogues and attended each other's lectures, John, I think this is the first time you have heard me preach. So, in addition to being perhaps a unique event for this chapel, this is also the next step in our ecumenical friendship.

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