

The End  
Matthew 28:16-20

When you reach the final verse of a book of the Bible, do you ever get the urge to wrap it up neatly with those 2 little words: THE END. Really, I just want to hear the MGM Lion roar and see the words fade-in onto the page: THE END.

As you may have surmised, this morning's reading is the conclusion of the book of Matthew, this Gospel Writer's version of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection. It's different from the other accounts' endings, and I actually think it's my favorite – at least for today.

Unlike Matthew, the book of John concludes with a personal affirmation: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:24-25). John simply “closes the book”, so to speak, on those “other stories” by completing his own part in his story.

The Gospel according to Luke describes Jesus as being “carried up into heaven” and leaves the disciples “continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:51-52). It reminds me a bit of a fairy tale: “And they all lived happily ever after”. But when I think of “happily ever after”, I can't help but remember the musical *Into the Woods*, where, when followed through to a further end, all our favorite fairy tales end more tragically than happily.

Mark's Good News gets a little more complicated. You see, there are two endings to his story. The first is quite accurately called “The Shorter Ending of Mark”. This one is believed by scholars to be the original, and it very simply concludes after the women flee from Jesus' empty tomb: “And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation” (Mark, shorter ending). Short and sweet. No wondrous tales of appearances or commissions ... only a bit of ambiguity about how the proclamation *actually* got out there.

The “Longer Ending of Mark” – the one most likely added by later writers who needed a little more UMPH in the story – includes both an appearance by the risen Jesus and a commission to the disciples which remarks on some “signs that will accompany those who believe”. Signs like casting out demons, speaking in tongues, snake-handling and healings. Finally, Jesus is taken into heaven and sits down at the “right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). Nice, but not the work of Mark.

So I return to Matthew, today's text and the focus of my meditations this week.

“When the disciples saw Jesus, they worshiped him;  
but some doubted.”

I'm so glad they did.

But what exactly did they doubt? Did they doubt *who* they were worshiping? Did they doubt it was Jesus or did they doubt that he was resurrected? Did they doubt that they could continue, that they could go through it all again? Did they doubt the purpose or rightfulness of their worship? And how many is some? Was it 10 of the 11? Or just 2? Does it matter? Some doubted, and I appreciate Matthew adding that. So when I doubt – doubt the seemingly basic tenets of my Christian faith or doubt my ability to keep on keeping on or doubt the usefulness of the act of worship – I know I’m not alone...nor am I singled out. We don’t know WHICH of the disciples doubted. It doesn’t matter, it’s just another part of our story.

Despite the doubts,

“Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and disciple all peoples. Baptize them and teach them my commandments.’”

Upon first reading people sometimes get nervous with this injunction. Especially progressive, interfaith-minded people. I don’t want to drag people kicking and screaming to the salvation of my religion. And yet, I acknowledge Jesus’ authority as given by God, and I am witness to his special knowledge of a Way or a path of being here on earth. He knows what he’s talking about. I trust his commandments to *really be* for all people.

But just which commandments does he expect to be taught? Matthew has already expressed them in a confrontation with someone who asks, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is greatest?” And Jesus responds, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ... And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (that is, all of scripture).

This is a commandment I can pass along. I have no qualms about proclaiming it to all I meet, whatever their spiritual path. The retirement community in which I served in Connecticut had some of the toughest religious customers I’ve encountered. They didn’t want to hear about spirituality and definitely didn’t want preaching. But when they came into my office, they never failed to remark on a poster I had that delineated this very rule as expressed by all major faith traditions...each in its own words.

This is the commission that Jesus gives: he calls the disciples to disciple others through this message. And then he makes a promise.

“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”.

So finally, here it is. This final verse is the real reason why I prefer Matthew’s ending to the other Gospels. Jesus isn’t lifted away from his people. He doesn’t take his leave of us, but promises his presence. “Remember”, he says. Remember.

Matthew brings us full circle, right back to chapter 1 verse 23: “‘they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means ‘God is with us.’” Not just until the end of the story, happily ever after, but always – through it all – to the end of the age.

This morning’s text is challenging. But it’s comforting, too. I appreciate the balance.

Now, here's something else that I appreciate: the timeliness of the lectionary offering this text. Here we have this "end" of a story just as we celebrate the "end" of a story for some of our members. [At the 2<sup>nd</sup> service today we will have an] acknowledgement of our graduates. The end of a journey through High School, College or Graduate work. Degree in hand they can all shout THE END! And it is indeed an end.

But the degree they walk away with brings with it its own injunction: They now carry knowledge; and they can't just leave that knowledge here. Rather, they take it with them— and they're expected to *use* it. As disciples, so are we all.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”...and now I pass it along to you.

You, my students whom I have disciplined.

Now you graduate – get your diploma –  
and you must disciple those who come next.

You didn't go through this training for nothing –  
didn't earn this moment just for the moment.

It's an end, but it's not THE end.

So I pass the torch to you, you who are ready.

But remember – the knowledge doesn't leave you.

You carry it – I'm always here,  
always with you as you continue the story.

Just another reason I like Matthew's Gospel end for today.

Because it fits.

Because it's satisfying.

Because it doesn't close us off from what was and what will be.

Even amidst the doubt and the charge to continue the mission, I'm content with today's reading.

Sometimes it's okay to feel contented,

just as sometimes it's good to feel discomforted.

I will probably have to deal with the discomfort of Luke or Mark or John another day; but for today, all I have to say is:

The end ... and the beginning.

Amen.