

There is a Spanish proverb that goes like this:

“It is not the same thing to talk of bulls
as to be in the bullring.”

The life of Jesus has authenticity
for that very reason:

He didn't just talk about the Reign of God,
he was in it – he was the Reign of God.

Jesus commissions us
to evangelize the Reign of God.

The story was told by Soren Kierkegaard
about a man walking down the street
who noticed a sign in the window of a shopkeeper
that read, “Pants Pressed Here.”

Since he was in his way to an important meeting,
and needed to look his best,
the man entered the shop.

“The sign says, Pants Pressed Here.” *Yessir.*

“I'd like you to press my pants.”

Why would you ask that, sir?

“Because your sign says, Pants Pressed Here.

And my pants could use a touch-up.”

I'm sorry sir, but we do not press pants.

“Then why do you have that sign in your window?”

Oh. That sign is not for us.

It's for one of our customers.

In this shop, what we do is paint signs . . .

And so does the church, I'm afraid,
when it comes to evangelism.

We just paint signs, we don't actually evangelize.

Today's text should make us change our minds.

Modern America is a broken, hostile,
dangerous place,

not unlike ancient Palestine of the apostles.

People are suffering.

People commit heinous acts of violence.

Reason outdoes faith. And fear outdoes reason.

We can huddle here in a holy sanctuary,
safe and secure.

But the Great Commission reminds us
that we have work to do,

being the active presence of Christ in the world. ■

In all three gospel accounts of the passion of Jesus,
the events happen in a rush:

Aggrieved and agitated,

Jesus prays in the garden —

“Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.”

Officers arrest Jesus; he calmly surrenders.

Peter denies knowing Jesus three times.

Jesus faces trial. He is sentenced to crucifixion.
The other disciples all desert him and flee.
The crucifixion is witnessed by his women followers.
Jesus expires on the cross.
His body is laid in a sealed tomb.
Judas hangs himself.
Chap. 28 of Matthew opens early Sunday morning
with discovery of the empty tomb.
Two women arrive,
Mary Magdalene and another Mary,
to find the stone rolled back from the tomb.
An angel sitting atop the stone tells them,
“Do not fear. Jesus isn't here.
He has been raised as he predicted.
Come, see the place. Then tell the other disciples
that Jesus is going ahead of them, to Galilee.”
The women start to flee
in a state of fear mixed with elation.
Just then, they bump into the risen Jesus.
As they fall on their knees to worship him,
Jesus himself tells the women, “Do not be afraid.
Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee,
and they will see me there.”

The women do as Jesus commands,
because as today's lesson opens,
the surviving apostles are in Galilee
climbing up whatever the mountain is
that Jesus has directed them to.
Now, with Judas gone, they are eleven in number.
Put yourselves in their position.
These men are bound to feel
confused and resentful, angry and fearful.
There is probably a price on their heads.
The only thing good about this situation
is that they're not in Jerusalem.
In Galilee, they are closer to the safety of home.
Why have they been summoned?
What more is going to be expected of them?
They stop to rest in small groups as daylight fades.
A figure silhouetted against the setting sun
begins to move toward them.
Some recognize the face and fall to the ground.
Others hesitate.
Perhaps this is an illusion. Or an imposter.
The man approaches,
his body casting a long shadow in front of him,
no illusion, but a real person.

Could the women have been right –
could Jesus be alive?
When he greets them,
they know it’s not an imposter. It is Jesus!
One by one, they move in closer,
tears flowing freely.
“All authority in heaven and on earth
has been given to me.”
This does not sound like the Jesus
they last remember, praying in the garden.
This majestic voice
sounds as if it’s coming from a throne.
From where does Jesus get this authority?
Peter whistles as the explanation occurs to him:
Jesus has just returned from the Lord God.
This is wonderful good news!
All strain to hear what he has to say next.
“Therefore ...”
Many of the apostles hold their breath at the word,
“therefore.” What’s he going to say?
Therefore, we are free of Rome?
Therefore, God is setting up a new throne?
“Therefore,” Jesus says, “go,
make disciples of all peoples.”

They would understand this command as,
“Make disciples of all, even Gentiles.”
Wonderful! Everyone exhales.
Galilee is full of Gentiles.
After Galilee, we keep moving north.
This is exciting!
We’ll live among the people,
telling everyone the good news of Messiah,
making disciples everywhere we go.
We’re with Jesus again! We’re disciples again!
Peter, the very one who a few days earlier
had denied knowing Jesus,
takes another deep breath.
His eyes well up with tears as he realizes,
Jesus is including him in this mission.
Even he can be a priest in Jesus’ name.
He can feel the power of the Holy Spirit within him.
Jesus goes on: “... baptizing them in the name
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .
and teaching them to obey
everything I have commanded you.”
Jesus finishes. “And now, wonder of wonders,
I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
The eleven disciples are jubilant at this promise.

Jesus is not saying goodbye.
He will remain present,
forever, even beyond their generation.
So the Gospel of Matthew ends with
these eleven common men,
lacking any credentials,
gazing hopefully over the green valleys of Galilee.
How astonished the apostles must feel when
Jesus says they are working on his commission.
At this stage in the game,
the disciples are assuming
that Jesus the shopkeeper presses pants.
They don't know yet that the sign in the window
is for a pants-press business down the street
which they will have to start.
Jesus tells the disciples – including us –
that we're Working on Commission.
His commission. ■

One of the best jobs I ever had,
ten years into my career, was one for which
I had no preparation or experience.
I was recruited from the Marketing Department
to be a Management Trainer in Human Resources.

When I accepted the position, I confessed,
in all humility that I had never even attended
a management training class, much less taught one.
And my wise manager said,
'I know all I need to know about you.
'You're teaching Time Management tomorrow.
'I'll be away for the next three weeks.
'I have confidence in you. You'll be fine.'
And I was.
To her everlasting credit,
that manager never entered my classroom
to observe me teach until many months later.
She heard from my trainees that I was doing fine.
She commissioned me and left me to thrive.
Something like that happens to the apostles,
I imagine.
Humble with self-doubt,
yet grateful for the opportunity,
they rise to the occasion.
There is no way
they're going to disappoint their Master
who puts such trust in them that he disappears.
I take comfort that when they meet the risen Jesus,
some of the disciples hesitate to recognize him.

Because we understand their hesitation,
we appreciate the change that comes over them.
The Gospel did in fact spread from a narrow strip
of Mediterranean land to the whole world.
Jesus approaches us, doubts and all.
We live in the same age as the first apostles,
the age between Christ’s resurrection
and Christ’s coming again.
He commissions us to disciple and baptize
and teach, notwithstanding our doubts.
Jesus speaks those imperative words to us today:
make disciples, baptizing and teaching.
We must trust that Jesus is with us in our doubts
and among us in the challenges of our commission.
To earn our commission
we should bring in results —
growth of the Reign of God,
fueled by the Holy Spirit.
What does it mean for the church
to go, and baptize, and teach?
Do we have to take to the streets?
Do we have to push faith
on unsuspecting strangers?

One of the lessons of the great missionary age
that flowered toward the end of the 19th century,
is that mission is about learning
as much as teaching,
about listening as much as acting,
and about being in the presence of the Spirit
as much as traveling.
Successful salespeople who work on commission
understand the benefits
of learning, listening, and being present.
These are not passive behaviors,
but rather attentive.
Evangelism can sound like this:
‘Now that I’ve gotten to know you better,
I think you’d like our church.’
Mission can look like this:
‘Accompanying people before and after surgery —
that’s something our church could be doing.’
Discipling happens in our scripture discussions
on Tuesdays, which extend an open invitation
to question the text and be questioned by it.
The work of making disciples
does not happen in a rush,
like the events of Jesus’ passion.

Getting a non-believer to accept Jesus Christ
as Lord and Savior and receive baptism
can be slow work.

But it happens, and can happen again.

Jesus knows all that is necessary to know about us
and it's sufficient.

He isn't asking us to hold revivals,
preach on street corners,
or send forth teams of two to distant lands.

Given the help of the Holy Spirit,
Jesus still says to us, his followers,
'Go, make disciples, and teach.

'Your first assignment is tomorrow. I'll be away.

'I have confidence in you. You'll be fine.'

He trusts us.

Vocation gives life deeper purpose.
Knowing why your life is important,
you can tolerate danger and suffering.

In the dark days of the Nazi concentration camps
the ones who survived were the ones
who had a purpose to keep on living.

The Great Commission is our purpose,
our vocation.

In the Great Commission, Jesus commands us –
the people of Ocean View Presbyterian Church –
to connect all peoples
with all persons of the Triune God.

All includes those within this fellowship
whom we have lost touch with,
including those who have drifted away from faith.

All includes the many in this area
who call themselves Christian but have no church.
All includes members of our own families
who have let their faith life lapse.

All is a lot of people.

Evangelism isn't an option, it's a mandate.

Since we live in the bullring of the Reign of God,
we must not just talk about bulls, but face them.

We can't just paint signs. We have to press pants.

Worship (the work of the people)
is our management training class,

preparing us to be the Gospel of Jesus Christ
in and for the world.

May it be so for each one of us
and all of us together.

Amen.