

“Apostles: Endgame”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 28:16-20
April 28, 2019 - Second Sunday of Easter

I don't know if you've heard, but a big movie came out this weekend.

Fear not — this is a spoiler-free zone for *Avengers: Endgame*. I intentionally haven't seen it yet so I couldn't even accidentally make anyone super angry this morning.

Meanwhile, tonight some of us will be watching episode three of the final six of *Game of Thrones*.

These two grand, immensely popular epics are wrapping up their stories, and our culture can barely contain itself. People are aching to know how the narrative draws to a close. Those who care will have lots of opinions about whether the writers did a decent job of wrapping together all the loose ends in a satisfying way.

And we know that this isn't really the end. It's not the end for the Marvel Cinematic Universe. And HBO is supposed to be working on spinoffs. So even as these big stories conclude, the table is being set for more action, more thrills, more drama.

I really would love to spend the next couple of hours talking about superheroes or ice zombies or wizards or whatever else y'all want to get nerdy about. We'll have to save it for after the Egg Hunt, because Jesus has given pretty clear instructions this morning. Besides, this service doesn't last two hours [snap!] — but half that.¹

In our worship here at Edgewood we started the Gospel of Matthew at the beginning at Christmas and have been working through it, in order, up to today. Now we find its final verses: its wrapping-up of the story, its setting the table for more.

Just how do you end a Gospel? How do you close the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection? “Happily ever after...” doesn't make sense. When I was in college if you told a story that didn't really have an ending you'd get a laugh if you realized it yourself and tacked on, “..and then I found twenty dollars!”

Each of the Gospel writers handles this problem differently.

Mark ends abruptly — “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” This leaves the hearer in a perplexing cliffhanger that leads to questions about how the news of resurrection will terrify and amaze them.

Luke offers the closest thing to a Gospel post-credits scene. After a couple of resurrection appearances, Jesus tells the disciples to hang tight in Jerusalem and be ready for what God has prepared for them next. And then he ascends into heaven, bridging the story between the Gospel and Luke's sequel, the *Luke 2: The Acts of the Apostles*.

John closes with a narrator's voiceover, perhaps Morgan Freeman, saying, “But there are also many

¹ This is an *Avengers* reference. If it makes no sense, I apologize.

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.”

And here is Matthew with this Great Commission.

Here Jesus meets these disciples, these students, and makes them apostles, ones who are “sent out.” He meets them in Galilee, where his ministry started and he first found them — where their story together began.

He meets them on a mountain, and when the hardcore Matthew nerds see a mountain on the screen they cheer like they would for one of their favorite characters, knowing that Jesus gave a sermon on a mountain and went up to pray on one and there was the transfiguration and, after all, mountains are places of revelation on which people encounter God throughout scripture. They gather on higher ground, where earth and heaven touch, at the crossroads of the mundane and the divine, in a liminal space, a place that is somewhere of rock and dust, and a place that is also *Knowhere*.²

There are eleven disciples there and the fact that it’s not twelve causes a twinge of pain at the betrayal of Judas. Matthew tells us that “some doubted” — a little Easter Egg, for we who struggle at times with all of this, to see that this message is for us as well.

We imagine that Matthew’s community needed direction and identity and a unifying mission, and so this is the post-resurrection encounter they get. Jesus begins by asserting authority: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Questions of authority have wound in and out of this Gospel: What does authority mean? Where does it come from? What sort of power does it wield? Jesus claims *all* of it. He says all of it — on heaven and on earth and where the two meet on this mountain — all of it has been given to him.

There is no more *twist* left in this story. The surprise was at the tomb. Hear it loud and clear, disciple-apostles. Hear it and know it and therefore *go*.

Go and talk about everything we talked about.
Go and do everything we did.
Go and show and heal and proclaim.
Make disciples. Baptize. Teach.

Make disciples of all nations.

If we hear those words and immediately think about marching into foreign lands full of heathens and converting them, I think we miss Jesus at least twice and once more on Sunday.

First, we have to take in just how audacious a directive this was. From this insignificant backwater of the Roman Empire — and worse the country bumpkin area of Galilee within it — all the nations are to be made disciples? Jesus spoke in a world of emperors and conquerors and he is sending these eleven to take it on without one Ironman suit and zero dragon glass!³ And we need to note how Jesus — who has been laying out a case for expanding the covenant to the Gentile world — has just thrown the gates wide open.

² This is another *Avengers* reference. I’m so sorry.

³ So sorry.

Our world is still one of the powerful acting in self-interest. The Gospel remains a scandal to that house. And in the ensuing two thousand years that Gospel has spread. So much of South America and Africa and Asia is no longer “ripe mission field” but now places from which followers of Christ are commissioned. It’s a whole other sermon, but I do wonder what happens if we think of ourselves not as the disciple-makers, but as the ones in need of teaching.

Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Create an identity. Pronounce God’s claim of beloved-ness.

Not at the end of a sword, as the Church got into the habit of a few centuries after these words were spoken, when it became aligned with the powerful.

Not as a magical rite to confer salvation. Salvation has been taken care of in the previous chapter.

Not as tradition, like smashing a champagne bottle over the bow of a ship.

Christ baptizes with fire and the Spirit and so we baptize with as much celebration and awe and with the awareness that we are not in charge of what is happening.

We exclude a beloved child of God from Christ’s church — we deny their identity, their goodness, the joy they bring their creator — at our own peril.

Teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

Tell these stories, and then tell them again.

Teach that you are the light of the world, the salt of the earth.

Teach that when you look down at anyone, God is specifically and intentionally with them — for blessed are they.

Teach that the moving map of this earth looks very different from God’s perspective, and so putting trust in idols and ideologies and economies that do not strive for justice will leave you outside the party.

Teach that salvation comes not from thinking and believing the right things, but from trusting in a peace and a grace that you can’t fully understand or explain but which leaves you both trembling and ready to go.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Now to the One

who by the power at work within us

is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,

to God be glory in the church

and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.