

Part 52: Competing Commissions, Enduring Hopes (Easter 2019 Part 4)

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The other week some of our college students were trying to explain to me the significance of the pictures that humanity was able to take of a black hole. As they tried to explain to me astrophysics, I did begin to understand the magnitude of this event.

If you haven't heard or seen, earlier this month we, being the world, was able to capture for the first time an image of a black hole 55 million light years away from Earth. In order to do this it took an international team of 200 scientists, two years of supercomputing, eight radio telescopes strategically placed across the earth, and a half tone of hard drives. All that for one image that looks like a troll's belly button.

Yet it is being praised as one of the greatest scientific and technological marvels confirming theories of physicists dating back to Einstein. It is clear that in our era of discovery we know more about our world than ever before. And yet, it seems we know so little about our own lives.

As we are getting greater insight on everything around us, it doesn't appear to provide ourselves much more in terms of purpose, meaning, morality or guidance. In fact in Canada the second fastest growing economy is life coaching. In the United States life coaching is now a billion dollar market.

We know that light is being wrapped around a gravitational death ball 55 million light years away, but we don't know if we should get gluten free, cauliflower, or deep dish pizza. Science can tell us what our world is like, but it has yet been able to tell us how we should live. Science is good at description, but not as good as commission. That is it can tell us the way things are, but it can't tell us how we should live.

For that we turn to guides: life coaches, Google reviews, consumer reports, and Yelp. We want someone to help us understand not only our world, but our role inside of it. And these are important questions, questions you, religious or not, are probably looking to answer.

In the book of Matthew, he has showed us the guides that the religious Jews of the day often turned to. If you wanted guidance, assurance, affirmation and hope, you went to the chief priests or the Pharisees. They were the ones who knew how to please God, and they must then be the ones who knew how you too could find peace with God.

The problems is that Jesus came and with him came a flashlight illuminating how terrible these men were as guides. We've seen this shocking expose ever since Jesus pulled the rug out from under them in **Matthew 23:2-4**. Not long after that Jesus calls these same men: blind guides. Claiming to know where they are going, they are really blind men calling other men to follow them in false safety.

We saw their inability to help when Judas, convicted of his sin, ran to them and asked them for help. He knew he had done something wrong and ran to his guides and they responded: "This isn't our problem, fix it yourself."

Today, even after Jesus has been resurrected, Matthew is going to highlight the inability of the religious rulers to be a helpful guide, and he is going instead to show how Jesus is the guide that we can trust for all of our life. Jesus helps us in both description and in commission.

Here we are one week after Easter, we've looked at the story of Jesus' resurrection and maybe you are thinking: "What's next?" What do I do with this information I've just received? We have looked into the black hole of the gospel, but what relevance does it actually have in my life? How will it guide me, and is it a trustworthy guide?

Today what we are going to see as we conclude the book of Matthew is this: **The Empty Promises of Unbelief** and **The Enduring Promise of Jesus**. We are actually looking at a passage which includes what Christians often call, "The Great Commission." Jesus' parting directions to his disciples. But what I want us to do right now is read our whole passage together and I want you to notice that the "Great Commission" is only one of the commissions Matthew includes in this story.

People everywhere are turning to guides wanting to know what the resurrection of Jesus means to them, but only one of those guides can provide real purpose. Let's read together **Matthew 28:11-20**

Let's begin by focusing on the first five verses of this text and it is here that we see **The Empty Promises of Unbelief**.

As the women from the tomb are running to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead, so too do some of the guards run into town to tell the chief priests and the elders that Jesus had risen from the dead.

And we actually see in both the soldiers and the priests, and with Jesus and the disciples, similar structures. Both appeal to authority, both provide a commission or a job, and both provide a promise. That's what we would want out of a guide right: I have authority on this issue, this is what you should do, and this is what will happen if you do this.

If you had to think about who your guide is who would it be? Your spouse? Your better, more successful friend? Your own experience?

The problem is that the promise of these religious rulers was empty, and didn't do anything to actually solve the problem of what the soldiers witnessed. The unbelief of the chief priests produced empty promises.

And don't we see the power of unbelief in this text? I want you to consider for a moment a parable Jesus shares in the gospel of Luke: **Luke 16:19-31**.

Doesn't Matthew 28 illustrate Luke 16? That even those who witness a dead man rising to life might still disbelieve? The problem we face when we are unbelievers isn't that of a broken mind, but that of a broken heart. These soldiers saw, witnessed, heard and experienced the resurrection of Jesus Christ: they felt the earthquake, they saw the angels, they witnessed the empty tomb.

So they ran to their guides and said: "What do we do with this?" They explain "all that had happened" (vs. 11) to these men. Now not only do the guards have a clear picture of what happened, but so to do the religious officials. Jesus broke the tomb.

It would have made complete sense for the religious officials to finally have an "ah-ha" moment here. They knew Jesus had been telling people he was going to rise from the dead. They could have remembered the very text they knew so well in Hosea 6 which says, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will heal us." They could have remembered Jesus saying that he would provide the sign of Jonah, and that just as Jonah was spit up after three days in the belly of the fish, Jesus was spit out from death itself.

When the officials heard the reports of the guards, they could have been good guides. They could have heard this witness and said: "This makes sense of everything we are looking for. Believe in this man, do whatever he tells you."

But they didn't, even when he was raised from the dead. This underlines the reality that is true for all of us: faith is a gift. In Matthew 28 we have groups of people encountering the same truths, some believe and some don't believe. Some who are naturally predisposed to believe didn't believe. Some who are naturally predisposed to disbelieve, do.

But this is because faith is a gift from God. Faith is not a work of merit, but a gift of mercy. This is what Paul makes clear in **Ephesians 2:8-9**. If faith is a gift from God, then faith is not first a sign that you love God, but that God loves you. What a beautiful reminder of God's nearness to us.

And if you don't have that faith, even this does not mean you are beyond God's love because here you hear this message. And look at what Paul says: **Romans 10:17**. Faith comes from God, and the message you hear right now is the message that God wants to grant you faith in Jesus Christ. He wants you to experience the fullness of his love so that you too might look at your life through the lens of Jesus and say: "This makes sense."

If that's you today, I encourage you to humbly in your heart ask God to give you the eyes of faith. That he wouldn't just inform your mind, but that he would actually heal your heart.

And this Matthew text shows you why you should want that kind of faith. Because unbelief always offers false promises. It never actually helps us.

These Roman guards went to the chief priests because they knew if they went to Pilate they would have been killed for failing at their jobs. So they appealed to the authority of the priests in hopes that they would do something about it. And so the chief priests gave them a commission and a promise.

The commission: go and tell people that the disciples stole the body while you were sleeping. The promise: here is some money, and we will make sure that the Roman government doesn't trouble you. And even more than that, Matthew tells us that this story has been well received by the Jews. The payment, the cover up, the story, it all stuck. It all worked.

But it couldn't actually help with men with what they saw. They knew what they experienced and this story wasn't it. Their life became the false relief of a lie. Acting like they found relief in every reassuring pat on the back, but knowing in their hearts that they still didn't find what they were looking for.

I think social media has allowed our world to see the pain these men felt. For many of us, we ourselves, or those we watch, provide portraits of peace, relief, success, and salvation on social media hoping that

if it can get liked enough, praised enough, affirmed enough that we ourselves will believe that we actually did it, we found it.

But in our hearts we know that there is an experience of longing that we have, which no applause can seem to satisfy. Our works of self-justification only seem to convince those around us, but we can't convince ourselves.

This is the empty promise of unbelief: meaning and purpose are promised, applauded, and celebrated. But at some point we find them to be empty echoes of the experience we cannot shake.

The story may have stuck, but it doesn't work. We need a better guide and a greater promise.

Look with me at the contrasting commission and promise of real hope: **Matthew 28:16-20**

So here we see our second point: **The Enduring Promise of Jesus.**

While the soldiers are running to their authority figures in hope, so to do the disciples follow their authority figure up to Galilee. And there, Jesus appeared to the eleven. Where the soldiers were forced into fascination with a lie, here Jesus' followers become overwhelmed by the truth.

And they fall down and worship him. But did you notice the small detail that Matthew includes here? Look back at **Matthew 28:17**.

This past summer we shipped off one of our own members, Shaun Philip back to Dubai. His education visa was up, and we had a big going away party where we understood the somber reality that we probably wouldn't see this brother again until we were united in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

A couple weeks ago I got up and began my very mechanistic morning routine. I showered, made my coffee, unlocked my front door and turned on my front porch light, sat down, read my Bible, and I began to pray at the conclusion of my Bible reading. At this point it is about 6:00 in the morning, and I have a confession to make, often times my holiness is overshadowed by my sleepiness and these morning prayers are often a little too peaceful for me.

So it was to my surprise when at six in the morning my front door flew open and in walked Shaun Philip. I sat there for what seemed like a minute with a blank stare trying to figure out if I had fallen asleep and was dreaming, or if this was really real. My mind ran through every reason why what I was seeing couldn't possibly be Shaun, bursting into my house, at 6am, like it was an ordinary thing. And I doubted, I hesitated, because there was so much to think through.

I imagine that this was the experience of those who doubted. It isn't to be assumed that those who doubted continued in their doubt, because if they doubted Jesus was going to rise from the dead they probably wouldn't worry themselves about going to where Jesus said he was going to meet them after he rose from the dead.

But either way, what we do know is that for some people who encountered the same news as everyone else, there was a moment of hesitation. There was for some an immediate change of worldview, but for others it took a bit to fully understand what to make of this Jesus.

There is a beautiful story in the gospel of Mark (Mark 8) where Jesus laid hands on a blind man to heal him and asked the blind man what he saw. The blind man said he saw people walking, but they looked like trees. Jesus touches his eyes again, and then the blind man saw everything clearly.

Now this is an odd story isn't it? Why would the very Jesus who beat death itself struggle to bring healing to a blind man. Well Jesus was doing something very intentional in the book of Mark, he was showing his disciples that gospel clarity often comes slowly, but always comes at the hand of Jesus.

If you are like one of these people in the gospel of Matthew, willing and wanting to follow Jesus, but still wrestling with the implications in life and the clarity in thought then take heart: not everything comes at once. Keep following Jesus, keep going to his mountain and trust that Jesus will grant you greater clarity and clearer worship.

And how do we know this isn't just an empty promise? Because Jesus is a better guide. Jesus' authority, Jesus' commission, and Jesus' promise are the only ones that have the ability to make sense of our life and our world. He moves us from description to commission. He's what we've been looking for and we know that if we examine his commission.

Jesus begins by appealing to authority: **Matthew 28:18**.

Everyone hates authority until they need it. Until you want an authority on your medical condition, security from harm, the comfort of knowing you're not doing anything wrong.

Just as the soldiers went to the religious officials, we always appeal to authority whether it is our parents, our teachers, our background, or culture itself. But here Jesus expresses a greater authority: all authority in heaven and on earth.

The priests promised to protect the soldiers, but the priests and their temple would be overthrown by the Roman government in a few decades. Their authority was fleeting.

But here stands Jesus, expressing something which had been true since he was born of a virgin but now was seen in full: he has all authority. How do we know that? Because Christians, atheists, Mormons and Muslims all admit one universal authority: death.

The poet George Crowly speaks to its universal power: "Age on age shall roll along, O're this pale and mighty throng; Those that wept them, those that weep, All shall with these sleepers sleep; Brothers sisters of the worm, Summer's sun, or winter's storm, Song of peace, or battles roar, ne'er shall break their slumbers more; death shall keep his silent trust, 'earth to earth and dust to dust!'"

Death shall keep his silent trust. But Jesus broke it. Jesus has shown that if he has beaten death, there can be no greater authority than this man for there is nothing which can challenge the one who remains undead.

Do you realize that when this God speaks into your life, it doesn't come in empty authority? That Jesus really is who he says he is and can really promise the things he promises. And because Jesus is the authority it also means that for those who are believers your life belongs to Jesus.

Before we even move on to Jesus' task and Jesus' promise, it is here on this mountain top where the world's greatest guide makes sense of all of our life: we were made to follow this man.

I just spoke with a pastor who visited Israel and he said it was really sad to see the shrine type idolatry that is set up over there in the historic places of Christianity. The truth is there are no shrines for the Christian faith because when you follow a risen savior he sends you out into the world not back to the tomb.

And this is the commission Jesus gives to his disciples, a commission rooted in his divine identity as the risen and ruling savior: **Matthew 28:19-20a**.

Christianity by divine decree is a missionary faith. It sends us out into our world with the words and work of the gospel. Our guide sends us out with a clear mission and vision. The contrast between the soldier's commission and the disciple's commission is clear isn't it?

The soldiers were sent out to spread a lie out of a love for their own life. To secure their own safety they had to tell others a lie. But the disciples here are sent out with the truth for the love of the others.

Jesus command is to go out and to grow up. Go out and make disciples baptizing them. That means preaching to people who aren't saved the saving message of Jesus and adding them into the church. This is one of our goals for Community Groups. Community Groups are one of the ways that we go out in Missoula and reach those who haven't heard the gospel.

But we are also to grow up, to come alongside those who are believers and to together help each other follow Jesus better in all of life. Together, this is what it means to follow Jesus.

Christians are not immune from the confusion that comes in living in this world. We need to make decisions like where am I going to live, what am I going to study, who will I marry, where will I work. But here Jesus as our true guide gives us meaning and purpose in a way which cannot be shaken. Because the truth is that we can find meaning in this commission in Missoula and in Mozambique.

You can go out and grow up behind a pulpit and at Pizza Hut.

I have met so many Christians who by worldly standards have no clarity or vision for their life, they bounce from job to job, or take less than glamorous positions. Yet they have a purpose and meaning in their life that crushes their anxiety. They know that what God has called them to do is to give their lives for his glory and the love of others regardless of where they are.

If you have been saved by this Jesus, he has given you work to do. Go, glorify God and love others to the ends of the earth. But this is also where we must remember, as seen in this very text, this is not the only commission.

There are two commissions in this text. Culture applauds one and is appalled by the other. When you begin to wrap your life around Jesus' call and not the American dream, culture will challenge your priorities. When you begin to wake up an hour earlier to encourage your friend in his faith, or go to coffee with a sorrowful co-worker, culture will challenge your comfort. When you are preparing to give money to missions or churches, culture will question your joy. When you are willing to let your children

be sent to Eastern Africa, Syria and China for the sake of global missions, culture will doubt your parenting.

When 1 Peter says that the devil lurks around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour, it means that the very spiritual forces of this world are after the heart of believers seeking to fill them with fear. Fear that you will miss out. Fear that you won't find your comfort. Fear that our guide is wrong.

But our guide isn't wrong. Our guide cannot die. Our guide will not be silenced. Our guide knows no boundary. Our guide holds in his hands pleasures forever more. Our guide has granted to us salvation leading to life. And our guide has promised in his defeat of death itself that never, in all the years left, will he leave us.

This is the promise of Jesus for those who follow him: "I am with you always to the end of the age."

This commission of Jesus is far more than a task. It is the very work we were made for. The death of Jesus makes sense of our broken world, but the life of Jesus gives us an irrevocable call inside of it.

This is how the Gospel of Matthew ends. There is no nice summary of everything written, no compelling appeal by Matthew to believe. Just the call of Christ for Christians to worship the risen Jesus and follow his lead in all of life.

And there really is no more fitting ending. If you remember where Matthew started, he started with a genealogy that reached all the way back to Abraham. That genealogy traced the ethnic heritage of the Jews from Abraham to Jesus. It's only fitting that a book which began by reaching back ends by calling us forward.

Here it traces not the line of an ethnic people but the work of a spiritual one.

It's as if Matthew's readers might protest at this cliff hanger: But what will the disciples do?! But I think Matthew's intended ending is the ending I pray the Holy Spirit is working in your heart right now: But what will I do? How can you make one step forward in this commission this week?

Our greatest problem was not meaninglessness. Our greatest problem was that our sin had separated us from God and out of fear we turned to everyone but him looking for what only he could provide. But Jesus has died for our sin and risen so that our life might find its work and its purpose in him.