



LESSONS for LIFE

April 27, 2008 7:00pm

NOW WHAT?

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Our scripture tonight is taken from Matthew 28, verses 16 – 20:

But the eleven disciples went away into Galilee to a mountain where Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him they worshipped Him, But some doubted. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All power has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Creator and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

I want to speak briefly with you, as long as my voice holds up, about the question, what now? Some of you may choose to reverse it and say, "Now what?" Two different meanings. For the past several weeks you've heard from Brent about the resurrection and what it could mean to you as a faith community; and you've heard from Jo during her sermon series on Jesus about "Who Do You Say that I Am?" We heard about the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and about some account variations about the person of Jesus. We learned about the source 'Q' and quite probably the gospel of Mark was an original source used as a foundation for the other gospels. We looked at some elements of the personality of Jesus. I can tell you that having done some undergraduate studies into the person of Jesus I am always and have been amazed at just how much people find a need to find out more about Him, and in particular the sayings attributed to Him.

The historical Jesus of the Christian faith is often on the hot seat of debate. A few weeks ago Jo, as she was speaking, referred to an article that we had seen in Macleans and the title of the article was that Jesus has an Identity Crisis. I looked at that article a few times and read it and read it and pulled it apart and then I asked myself – is it Jesus that has the identity crisis or is it others? All of that thought-provoking discussion has to prompt us to ask one question: What now? Do we still worship? Do we still pray in Jesus' name? Do we still sing about Him? Absolutely. Absolutely!

I'm going to ask you a question. How many of you have been in a situation where it seemed that one after another things just went wrong and kept going on? Or, let me re-phrase that for those of you who don't like to use the word wrong. How many of you have been in a situation where and when things didn't go the way that you would have preferred for them to have gone, and quite frankly you'd had enough? I'm with you. At that defining moment when you can't take it, whatever it is, any more. You might think it or blurt out, what now? Or now what? Or what next? And the list could go on. Now, some of you might use some other more colourful terms that I'm not going to mention here; but when life seems to be dealing you a triple whammy; when there appears that those in your world are not with you; when you feel that you are doing your best but everything else seems to be falling apart, when you feel so alone and so unloved, what do you



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say? I call them the 'what now' moments. It doesn't mean that we have to stay there. It means that we have to recognize that things aren't just the way we want them to be and we have to do something to improve our lot.

I'm going to tell you briefly about a story of just a couple of weeks ago, and this is no reflection on anyone else. In fact, I want you to keep this only within these walls, and again I'll reiterate that it's no reflection on any one individual. Two Fridays ago I was at a conference with my students at the University of Toronto and the conference started on the Wednesday night and one of the student's parents had always been on time in collecting them, and it was Friday. It was the Friday of the men's retreat. Four o'clock came and I was watching my watch – and the parents were not there! Five after four; four fifteen and no parents. We'd been calling them but no answer. The student was getting quite concerned. I was feeling otherwise and I'm thinking, I'm supposed to be picking up a car at four-thirty to drive to the retreat. Four twenty-five – no connection with the parents. Four-thirty and we finally get through. The parents, who lived way north of the city, had decided that since I had mentioned to them about their gas-guzzling polluting very large truck that they were driving from up north, they decided to take the TTC, so they parked at Finch station but they neglected to tell me they hadn't been on the subway for years and they got lost! When we were trying to reach them they were in the subway, so we couldn't get to them. When we finally reached them they were somewhere on campus and they were completely lost. Four thirty came! I was supposed to pick up the car. Quarter to five came and they were still not there. Ten to five came and they showed up. Of course they were apologetic and I was saying to them, 'Don't worry about it,' but I was anxious. I quickly rode my bike over and left it at a friend's place and went to pick up the car. I wanted to miss the rush hour traffic. I went to the car rental and there was no car there! "We'll have one in ten minutes," I was told. Well, it showed up twenty minutes later, and I'm looking at my watch because I wanted to be at the retreat in time for registration at six o'clock and I realized this was not going to happen. I finally got the car and I drove home. It took me half an hour to get there and then I had to pack my stuff and I left the city at five to six. Obviously there was no way I'd make it to the retreat by six o'clock! I get on the highway and I'm driving and it's rush hour and I'm sitting there and I can feel my hands starting to clutch as I started to think, what now? Well, every rig that must have been out at that time was there; every person who decided to take his or her 1960s specialized car out on that afternoon was driving slowly and I must have been behind every single landscaping truck, you know, those with a trailer on the back and you can't pass them and by this time I'm still sitting there and getting really anxious and wondering what else could possibly go wrong. What now?

By the time I hit Brampton I thought – there's nothing I can do about this – so I turned on my CD and I started to listen to some Gospel music and all was well. I got to Mansfield and we were supposed to be eating at seven. I arrived at seven-twenty and as things had worked out, just as I walked up the steps they were about to ask for blessing. I am starving at this stage. Out comes the meal. Now I'm vegetarian. The chef somehow had made a mistake. There was no vegetarian meal there and I'm throwing up my hands thinking, what now? I know in the grand scheme of things my 'what nows' are really – if you consider them in world affairs – almost nothing, but we think about these little things that gather and gather and they eat away at us. But what now need not mean that things are necessarily going on. Throughout our lives we want to know what steps we're going to take professionally, career-wise, socially. What do I do now – after I've left High school? What do I do now – after I've left college or university? What do I do now – I have a job but can't climb the managerial ladder because everyone there has been in



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their respective position for several years. What do I do now as I ponder a career change? And talking about career-change, here are the disciples, after three thought-provoking years of activism walking with and following the revolutionary teachings of Jesus. He had predicted His death, resurrection and then He had gone on after a second time of appearing to several disciples. Surely, after He left, they must have asked what now? What do we do with the tools that He left us? What do we do with His sayings? What do we do with the teachings we heard? What do we do when He'd said that we will do even greater things than He did? Some of them had given up lucrative jobs. Matthew had been a tax collector, a position that people – very much like today – loathed! But he must have missed his steady income and the perks that came with it. Others were fishermen and had worked hard. I believe they were a very mixed group of personalities. For them Jesus had been known as the Messiah, Rabbi, Teacher, Master, Healer, Prophet... and the list goes on, but here they are, according to Matthew, in this post-resurrection scenario. Jesus had met with the eleven – remember that Judas Iscariot had committed suicide – and he met with them at an agreed upon place. That place was Galilee and it was interesting to me to note that Galilee was also used in the second chapter of Matthew when Joseph was directed to go there for the safety of the child Jesus.

Can you imagine the questions the disciples – when walking to the assigned place – had? Is it really Him? How do we know it was not an imposter? How is it possible? They had to have had questions and they may have asked what now? What would He want us to do? And the text says that some of them doubted, which is where we get out saying, 'Doubting Thomas.' Isn't it wonderful to know that as close as they were to Jesus some of them doubted? Mark goes further and says that He reprimanded them for their lack of faith and their stubbornness because they didn't believe the report of the others when they'd seen Him; and yet it reminds us that we can have our doubts. We can have our questions, we can have our differences of opinion and our analysis of the personality of Jesus can all be very different and yet it can all be okay. As rational enquiring thinking beings God will still meet us where we are. When Jesus met with them it appears there was only one thing that He wanted to convey and that was: they have a mission. That was the answer to their question. Go and teach all nations. Mark says, Go into the world and preach the gospel. Here was a stark contrast to the previous limited mission of the disciples to go only to Israel. The net of God's love has been thrown open and cast widely. Friends, don't let anyone tell you that you are not in that net because of who you are; that you are not in that net because of your sexuality; that you are not in that net because you don't believe what someone else believes; the net is wide and embracing. The commissioning is a central feature of the Easter experience. For many and other churches this is considered the great commission and hence starts the zeal to take news to other lands. The disciples have a new job description. They have a new role. Their reason to believe is extended. How many of us like it when, unexpectedly, our job description changes? You walk in on a Monday morning and find you have a different desk and by Wednesday your tasks are different? What now? They must have pondered – how do we do this? Are we going to do this alone? And before they knew it, Jesus tells them, "I will be with you till the end." What now?

The disciples according to another account need to be prepared for the task. They have to undergo some spiritual professional development. Having just finished a conference that had been in the planning stages for over a year I can tell you the importance of PD and preparation; yet in the end they had to wait: wait for power and in that sense – what now – means that they were filled with anticipation. And what about you? What now? We are bombarded with images



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and discussions about the Jesus industry. Awhile back I asked some of you at a Sunday night service what words came to your mind when you think of Jesus? You shouted out your responses and I remember someone saying that Jesus meant Saviour, a word I had not heard in this church before and I expected a collective gasp, but there was none and I'm grateful because that says the bigness and the spiritual growth of this church and to you as individuals and that is the way it should be because it does not matter who you are and how you see and experience Jesus, the fact is you are connected. You see I remember when I was in church we were raised to sing that *He's the lily of the valley, He's the bright and morning star; He's the fairest of ten thousand.....etc.* I remember songs like, *All to Jesus I surrender.* I remember songs like *Jesus, Jesus Jesus sweetest name I know...* Dare I say that we exist to be like Him. Did I say that we exist to be like Christ? God dwelling within. Activist; politician, rebel, shaking up the systems that oppress; promoting justice and the good news. What now? You have the potential to be a force for right. What now? You have the power of God's spirit. What Now? The disciples had to await the Pentecost experience but you have the spirit of God in you. What now? You are already empowered. You be the presence of God. The disciples went and preached. They were in the temple worshipping but they then went on to the upper room to wait, wait for another sign that they will be empowered to fulfill the task given them. You don't have to wait. The presence of God is already here, already within you. Don't let anybody be without it. Be like God. Have the characteristics of Jesus.

Amen