

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Heavenly Church

Matthew 16:13-20

If the gathering in today's text had happened via Zoom, Peter would have been quick to use the raise your hand feature. Or maybe he would have just bypassed it, unmuted himself, and jumped right in with his answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" Among the disciples, Peter is accustomed to being a lead student. He's normally eager to join the debate or to volunteer for a kingdom mission assignment.

After all, learning from Jesus isn't just a matter of classroom dialogue. Much of it is hands-on. Remember that Peter and the others have accompanied Jesus in his daily ministry. In addition to hearing his teaching, they've also seen it in action. They've witnessed Jesus healing the sick. They've watched him calm the storm. They've seen him walk on the water. They've participated in his miraculous feedings. They have firsthand experience with the power of heaven making its way into the life of this earth. For Peter and the others, discipleship is a rigorous curriculum involving both theory and praxis.

In today's session, Jesus does some research of his own by asking the disciples about how others perceive him. All these sermons he has preached. All these lessons he has taught. All these miracles he has performed. What does the public think of him? What are people saying about him on social media? Who do people think he is? Jesus surveys his disciples to get some answers to these questions.

Turns out that most people associate Jesus with Israel's prophetic tradition. The average person on the streets of Galilee sees him as another prominent messenger in a long line of figures who have shaped the identity and mission of God's people. Individuals like John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah. So Jesus is in pretty good company.

But Jesus is more than just an inspired messenger from God. He's not inquiring about public opinion because he's running for office. He already occupies the world's highest office. Peter confesses as much: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). "Christ" is the Greek term for "Messiah," the expected descendant of David who would come to establish God's righteous rule over Israel, and through that bring blessing to all nations. In other words, through the Messiah, God would put things right on earth.

You would think that Peter must be an A+ student to have figured all this out. But according to Jesus, this insight isn't primarily Peter's doing. It's God's doing. The Father has opened the eyes of Peter's heart and mind to see who Jesus is. By God's grace, Peter has seen the light, though not necessarily all at once. A couple of chapters before today's text, after the hand of Jesus had snatched him from stormy waters that threatened to sink him, Peter had joined others in confessing, "Truly you are the Son of God" (14:33). Through all the sermons and miracles and ministry, the light of heaven was illuminating Peter, helping him recognize and declare that God's long-awaited project of salvation was underway.

Notice that as soon as Simon confesses who Jesus is, Jesus turns right around and tells him who he is. Jesus gives Simon a nickname meaning “stone” or “rock.” The word play of the passage often gets obscured by our English translations, which end up making it sound like Jesus is renaming Simon as Peter. In reality, Jesus is saying, “Simon, you are Rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (vv. 18-19).

These verses have a long history of diverse interpretation, particularly when it comes to differences between the Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Christian faith, and Peter’s place in it. I’m not going to use today’s sermon to enter into that debate, but would simply stress one of the things that Matthew stresses, namely, that although Peter is foundational, Jesus himself is the builder. The primary action belongs to the risen Lord.

Jesus is constructing a community. When we look at the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see that he didn’t leave behind a school of thought, a series of writings, or a collection of monuments. He formed a community of followers called the church, the people of God, whose job is to confess him as the world’s Savior, at all times, in all places, under all circumstances.

As soon as Jesus mentions building his church, the first thing he says is that it will take shape in the midst of struggle and conflict. “Simon, you are Rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” “Gates of Hades” is a biblical expression for the threshold of the realm of death, or the power of death. The word translated as “overcome” or “prevail over” means “be stronger than.” The point is that death itself assaults Christ’s church, but cannot crush the community of his followers. The church will endure, and persevere, as it awaits the coming of Christ, when God’s redeeming purposes are complete.

This is a word of great assurance, especially in circumstances like the present, when the coronavirus pandemic assaults God’s gift of life, including the life of the church. As local congregations struggle to adjust, adapt, and overcome the challenges we face, we’re encouraged by our Lord’s promise that his risen presence is stronger than the power of Satan and the threat of death. Our present hardships will not stop the worship and witness of God’s people, in some form or another. COVID-19 will not halt Christ’s construction project. God’s will to save will prevail.

As I left the church one evening this past week, I spotted a familiar and disturbing site—turkey vultures sitting at the peak of the church’s roof and atop the cross on our bell tower. I realize that vultures like a high vantage point from which to search for their next meal, but it really doesn’t convey a positive image to passersby to have vultures, often associated with death, perching on our house of worship. I’m not asking the Buildings and Grounds Committee to look into our options. I’m just highlighting the fact that Christ’s church, including our local assembly, always lives out its calling in a world where it looks like death and destruction are always near.

All this is a reminder that God’s plan isn’t to pluck the church out of the world to shelter his people from any and all threats. Actually, the things that Peter and the other disciples had seen and heard in their life with Christ, and the things we witness and participate in in our life with Christ, are signs that the power of heaven has broken in upon us. I like the way Don Ratzlaff puts it: “I am learning that God intends salvation to be more than a ticket to heaven, and that his chief purpose in providing the church is not to transport us there with

as little inconvenience as possible.”¹ Instead, when Jesus asks you, “Who do you say I am?” and you confess, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” you become part of a community of Christians whom Jesus sends into the life of this earth to manifest the life of heaven, and to point to the coming of our Lord. According to Eugene Peterson, “Being a church member places us strategically yet unobtrusively at a heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth.”²

As you live out your Christian faith each day, there at that intersection of heaven and earth, your way is supposed to reflect Christ’s way, the way of the cross. We’ve seen this in the lives of fellow disciples, across the centuries, in all kinds of circumstances and conditions, including epidemics. In 1527, when the bubonic plague reached Wittenberg, Germany, the reformer Martin Luther chose not to flee the city like many others did, but stayed to minister to his fellow citizens. His own daughter Elizabeth soon died from the disease. Luther wrote a tract titled, “Whether Christians Should Flee the Plague.” In it he wrote, “We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals. Christian governors cannot flee their districts. Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: It turns them to crosses, on which we must be prepared to die.”³

It's important to keep in mind that in today’s text from Matthew, the cross is starting to come more sharply into view. This passage sits at a key location where the story is turning toward Jerusalem, toward Jesus’ suffering and death. In the text right after it, Jesus predicts his cross, and tells his disciples they must take up theirs. He expects them, and us, to follow him to death.

From 1347 to 1665, the Black Plague or Black Death ran in various forms, killing 25 million people in Europe and anywhere from 75 million to 200 million worldwide. It’s “flu-like” symptoms usually showed up after an incubation period of 3-7 days. In September 1665, a tailor’s assistant brought some flea-infested blankets from London to a small village named Eyam, where soon, many of the estimated 800 residents were dying from the disease. Eyam’s rector, or minister, along with the previous one, decided to quarantine the village to contain the disease. Eyam was located on an important trade route between two prominent cities, and if the plague spread to them, many more would die. So the ministers persuaded the villagers to self-quarantine.

According to eyewitness accounts:

A quarantine cordon was established with a one-mile radius marked by a ring of stones. For 14 months nobody went in or out of the village. Food was left at the boundary stone by nearby townspeople in exchange for gold coins submerged in vinegar, which villagers believed would disinfect them. The death-rate skyrocketed. ... One woman, Elizabeth Hancock, buried six of her children and her husband inside a month.

To limit infections within Eyam, church services were held outdoors and some villagers left their homes to live outdoors nearby. By the plague’s end, 260 of Eyam’s estimated 800 residents died, more than double the mortality rate of the plague in London. The villagers’ self-sacrifice had worked. The plague never spread to nearby towns and, 14 months later, in November 1667, the quarantine was lifted.

An Eyam survivors’ descendant wrote in a history of the village that succeeding generations of Eyam villagers should admire their ancestors: “who in a sublime, unparalleled resolution gave up their lives — yea: doomed themselves to pestilential death to save the surrounding country.”⁴

These stories of Christians from previous centuries aren't just entries in the pages of history. They're living testimonies to how Christ is building a church that looks like himself. A church where believers die to themselves, bring life to others, and show that the kingdom of heaven, not the gates of Hades, will have the last word.

¹ Don Ratzlaff in "Christian Leader" (April 23, 1991). *Christianity Today* (Vol. 35, No. 9).

² Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 95.

³ Lyman Stone, "Christianity Has Been Handling Epidemics for 2000 Years." *Foreign Policy* (March 13, 2020).

⁴ Zach Purser Brown, "Bubonic plague was so deadly an English village quarantined itself to save others," *The Washington Post* (March 2, 2020); David McKenna, "Eyam plague: The village of the damned." BBC News (November 5, 2016).