

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a bible opened to Matthew 28 at the center of your group. Have vigil lights each person can light to begin prayer.

LEADER: God reigns over all the earth.

ALL: Our God, the Holy One, is awesome.

LEADER: Let us praise God with all peoples.

ALL: We live in God's embrace.

LEADER: Jesus, you promise to be with us always.

ALL: Sustain us in your word and work. Amen.

Parker Palmer testifies in his book *Let Your Life Speak* that it is entirely possible to lead a life other than one's own—to do only what spouses, parents, or society expect, to pursue success or satisfy ambition.

In our cyber age it's easy to find reason to dismiss a dream before we try. Online forecasts show too many lawyers. Or, studies show the capacity to learn a language plummets after 40. Perhaps that is why the film *Hidden Figures* is so inspiring. It celebrates three African American women who achieve their dreams in the face of racism, Jim Crow laws, and stereotypes of women.

The three women, Katherine G. Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn, and Mary Jackson, each a gifted mathematician, meet as they work as human "computers" for the forerunner of NASA. They are part of a staff of black women who compute by hand

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the flight trajectories male engineers' request. They prove irreplaceably inventive in the push to get an American into space.

More than five decades have passed since the Second Vatican Council opened the window of renewal and pushed Catholics to catch up with the modern world. The council invited all of us lay folks, the people of God, to feast at the table of the Word, listen for the Spirit stirring in the world, and accompany the poor and afflicted in their joys and sorrow, griefs and anxieties. It called us to put our personal faith and love into action in our here and now.

Palmer insists we must listen to our lives telling us who we are. We must recognize the gifts we irrepressibly embody and share. "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life."

How do I answer, especially as a Christian? Teach. Parent. Heal. Invent. Negotiate. Act with compassion. Work for justice. Welcome the stranger even if they are immigrants.

● What life can you not help but live?

GOSPEL

Make disciples of all peoples.

NARRATOR: The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Jesus came and said to them.

JESUS: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching

them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember that I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28.16-20



What does living Jesus' teachings ask of us today?

In Matthew's gospel Jesus' final act is commissioning eleven of his disciples to extend his mission beyond Israel to all peoples. If we could ask Jesus, as Matthew portrays him, what he could not help but live, Jesus would respond, "Teach."

From the beginning to the end of his ministry, Matthew pictures Jesus as a wisdom teacher. In his farewell commission Jesus charges his disciples to keep teaching—to challenge all peoples to learn and live his word.

Matthew is listening and responding to his times in writing his gospel. The community for which he writes in the A.D. 80s is a community in transition.

As religious practice makes a transition from temple to synagogue, from a focus on sacrifice to a focus on written

traditions, Matthew wants people to see Jesus as the new Moses, the new authoritative teacher and law-giver for a new era. Matthew arranges his gospel to establish Jesus and his followers as the authentic inheritors of ancient Israel's traditions.

● To portray Jesus for our time, what characteristics would you emphasize?

● How is the Church today a community in transition?

Matthew uses mountains in several gospel scenes to underscore Jesus' authority. Massive, unchanging mountains represent stability and authority. Mountain heights suggest closeness to God.

On a mountaintop Jesus refuses the devil's temptation to rule the kingdoms of the world

and chooses to serve God alone, the first commandment (4.8-10).

Mt. Sinai is where ancient Israel's identity as the people of God begins. There Moses receives the old law of the ten commandments and seals a covenant between God and the people, who agree to keep the law. To identify Jesus clearly as the new Moses, Matthew has Jesus teach his new, authoritative law to his disciples on a mountain—his sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7).

On the mount of transfiguration, three of Jesus' disciples glimpse Jesus in glory with Israel's greatest leaders—the law-giver Moses and the prophet Elijah. In another scene Matthew pictures Jesus on a mountain, healing the lame, maimed, blind, and mute—doing the healing word he teaches (15.29).

Fittingly, then, Jesus calls his disciples to a mountain at the end of Matthew's gospel and commissions them to a world mission. In Jesus, Matthew and his community-in-transition see the messiah that the prophet Daniel envisions. The book of Daniel describes one like a human being who will come on the clouds and whose reign will not pass away (7.14). In Matthew's gospel from birth to final commission, Jesus is God with us always.

● What makes Jesus an authoritative teacher for you?

Jesus commissions his disciples to baptize and teach his commands—clear purposes. Baptism is the life-giving, cleansing action that welcomes believers into the new life of the risen Jesus, the life the Son shares with Father and Holy Spirit.

The risen Jesus calling his disciples back to a mountain in Galilee clues us what they are to teach—the new law he taught on this mountain at the beginning of his ministry. In this sermon Jesus insists he has come to fulfill, not abolish, the old law and prophets. Jesus expects more than the law of Moses. Jesus teaches his disciples to reconcile their angers before bringing gifts to God, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to love their enemies as well as their neighbors. He challenges his followers to be doers of his teachings in their lives (7.24).

Jesus teaches us a principle by which to judge our lives. What we do to the least—the hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick, and imprisoned—we do to him (25.31-46). Today because Jesus' first disciples fulfilled their commission and brought Jesus' teachings to all peoples, we have the challenge in our lives to be doers of his word.

● **What sermon does your Christian life teach?**

The eleven gather in Galilee because two women disciples lead them from Jesus' tomb to the mountain where they take up Jesus' mission. Two Marys—Mary Magdalene and Mary, the



mother of James and Joses—twice receive a commission to tell their brothers Jesus is risen. At the empty tomb an angel tells them to go and tell the disciples Jesus is risen from the dead and going ahead of them to Galilee, where they will see him (28.5-7).

The two Marys run with joy to tell the good news. On the road they meet the risen Jesus. They hold his feet and worship him. Then the risen Jesus commissions the women disciples, “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me” (28.10).

The eleven disciples go to Galilee because two women

fulfill their commission. They energize the community to take up the mission of the risen Jesus. The women animate the disciples who fled at Jesus' arrest rather than stand with him at the cross as they did (27.57-61). Some of the eleven doubt even as the risen Jesus commissions them.

A Roman road north to Damascus and south to Egypt crosses the mountain where Jesus commissions the eleven. Jesus sends them forth at this crossroads to the nations.

● **Who energizes Jesus' mission in our world today?**

● **How do women participate in expanding and energizing Jesus' mission today?**

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- Visit Kino Border Initiative, named for the first Jesuit missionary in the area near Tucson, Arizona, for stories of what people encounter at our borders. kinoborderinitiative.org.
- Find out how immigrants benefit your area and state. Find out when and why your family immigrated to the United States.

Jesus returns to heaven.

Luke ends his gospel and begins its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, with Jesus' return to God. We call Jesus' leave taking the ascension. Only Luke describes Jesus' return to God so dramatically. Luke's picture of Jesus ascending to heaven challenges us at the literal level but it's vital theologically.

First, the lifting up expresses who Jesus is. Luke's picture of a cloud taking Jesus out of sight echoes the vision in the book of Daniel of one like a human coming on the clouds of heaven to receive "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (14.7). Theologically, Luke uses this allusion to proclaim the risen Jesus is Israel's messiah, beginning the everlasting reign the book of Daniel describes.

Second, Luke identifies the foundations of the Church in this opening scene of Acts. The Church has leaders. Jesus has chosen and instructed apostles to spread his message. The Church has a trustworthy message. Theophilus, who represents all who are friends of God, can trust the message is true because the eyewitnesses experienced Jesus risen and present with them. The Church will have the Holy Spirit as its animator. Jesus' followers will receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit John the Baptist promised.

Third, the Church's mission. Jesus' followers don't know God's timetable. They don't know when God's kingdom will come to be. Their mission in history is clear. "You are to be my witnesses," Jesus says, "to the ends of the earth."

Jesus' followers become his witnesses.

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when his disciples had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This

Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Acts of the Apostles 1.1-11

● Put yourself in the place of one of the named or anonymous members of the first Christian community. Imagine your experiences of following Jesus, his crucifixion, his resurrection, his absence now after returning to God. Identify for your group who you are and speak in the first person "I" about your feelings, your fears, your prayers, and hopes.

PRAY

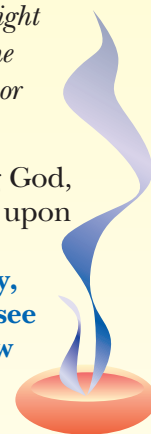
LEADER: The Spirit of Jesus lives, moves, and animates our being.

ALL: Come, Spirit, burn in our hearts. Stir us to loving action in our world.

Each picks up a vigil light and states an action the Spirit stirs within him or her.

LEADER: Life-giving God, pour out your Spirit upon us.

ALL: Let us prophesy, dream dreams, and see visions. Let us renew the face of our earth. Amen.



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