

Famous Last Words  
Matthew 28:16 – 20; Luke 24:44 – 53; Acts 1:3 – 14  
Sunday, June 2, 2019

“And they lived happily ever after.”

Those are probably the most well-known last words in all of literature/story telling. No one knows exactly when it was first used, but it goes back at least 300 years. Since then, there have been many more famous last words in literature and movies.

“There’s no place like home,” from *The Wizard of Oz*.

“I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” from *Casablanca*.

“Tomorrow is another day,” from *Gone with the Wind*.

Words that sum up the whole story or leave us with something memorable; some sense of hope for the future. And it’s not just in literature and movies. We assign a special weight or significance to the *last thing* that someone says. A person’s last words in life carry *meaning* for us.

Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, two founding fathers and Presidents, who were bitter political rivals in their earlier years, they literally *hated* each other, but later in life they became dear friends. They hadn’t spoken for years and years, but started corresponding by letters while they were both old and sick and nearing their deaths. It was exactly fifty years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1826. Jefferson woke up early that morning, looked at his doctor and said, “Is it the fourth?” His doctor nodded, and then Jefferson

died. Hours later, John Adams spoke his last words, “It is the glorious fourth of July. Jefferson lives,” not knowing that his friend had died hours earlier.

Unfortunately, not all last words are remembered because they are beautiful or solemn or have some deep meaning. There was a general in the Civil War named John Sedgwick who said, “They couldn’t hit an elephant at this distance!” Those were his last words.

Or a British soldier in World War II named Lawrence Beeter who said, “Maybe they only had one rocket.”

The poet Dylan Thomas wrote that amazing poem about making the most of your life before your die, “Do not go gentle into that good night; Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.” Unfortunately for him, he didn’t take his own advice. His last words were, “I’ve had eighteen straight whiskeys. I think that’s the record.”

Or Pancho Villa, a general in the Mexican Revolutionary War, who said, “Don’t let it end like this. Tell them I *said* something!”

German philosopher Karl Marx, when asked by his housekeeper if he had any last words, said to her, “Go on, get out! Last words are for fools who haven’t said enough.”

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In our scripture readings today, we hear the last words that Jesus spoke on Earth before ascending into heaven. Now, you would *think* that the fact that they were Jesus’ last words would make them incredibly significant and important to record accurately. But the gospels can’t seem to agree on exactly what Jesus’ last words actually *were*. First we heard his last

words from the book of Acts, where he says, “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.”

Then we heard Jesus’ last words from Luke’s gospel, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Then Jesus blesses his disciples as he is carried up into heaven, but we don’t even *get* the words of the blessing! The funny thing is, Luke and Acts are said to have been written by the same person, and the *author* can’t even agree with himself on what Jesus’ last words are.

Finally, we heard what are probably the most famous of Jesus’ last words, referred to as the Great Commission from Matthew’s gospel, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all 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, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Now, while there is some disagreement there as to exactly what Jesus’ last words *were*, there is a common theme that runs through *all* of those. In each one of those accounts, Jesus tells them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them, and they are to go out and tell *others* the things that they have seen and learned in him. In Acts, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.” In Luke, “I am sending upon you what my Father

promised...you will be clothed with power from on high, and you are my witnesses to all nations.” And in Matthew, “Make disciples of all nations. Teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always,” and what is *implied* there is, “I am with you always through the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s presence with you.”

In fact, it’s notable that there isn’t even an *ascension* in Matthew’s gospel. There is no point at which Jesus is taken up into heaven. Jesus just says, “Go! Because *I am with you always*.” There’s a sense in which these are *not* Jesus’ last words, because Jesus did not really leave them...or *us*. He is going *with* us, just in another form, and will *be* with us, until the end of the age.

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Two weeks ago we said goodbye to Ellen and Doug Moeller as they moved to Indianapolis. After worship we were down in the Fellowship Hall talking, until there were just a few of us left, and as Ellen and Doug turned to leave, they didn’t say *goodbye* or any other traditional recognition of an *ending*. Ellen said, very simply and deliberately, “Until next time,” and walked out the door.

It strikes me that that’s what Jesus is doing here. He isn’t saying *goodbye*. He is saying, “Until next time, because I am never fully *leaving* you. I will *always* be with you, just in a different way.”

The problem is, we think of Jesus as having *left* this world, and we often live our lives as if he were not with us. We treat each other as if Jesus is not with us always. We speak to each other (and ourselves) as if Jesus is not with us always. We treat this planet and its resources as if Jesus is not with us always. We spend our time and our money as if Jesus is not with us always. We

get frustrated and angry and scared and lose hope and despair as if Jesus is not with us always. We spend our lives trying to clothe ourselves in power – whether it’s political power, social and economic power, personal empowerment – when the last thing Jesus said was, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *me*.” Jesus has not *abandoned* this world or us. Jesus has *transcended* this world to *rule over* this world. And he says to us, “*You* will be clothed with power, not from your own personal striving or your domination of others. You will be clothed with power *from on high*, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

And the Holy Spirit *has* come upon us. 2,000 years ago next Sunday, on Pentecost, God’s Spirit rushed into this world, and it has never left. We breathed it in when we took our first breaths, and it will not depart from us even when we take our *last*. God is *still* with us, *always* with us. Our challenge, our *calling*, is to *trust* that God is constantly present with us, and to *live* like God is constantly present with us. To think and speak and act like God is constantly present with us. To treat this world and its creatures and resources like God is constantly present with us. To spend our time and money like God is constantly present with us. To treat those who are poor and oppressed like God is constantly with us, because Jesus has told us that God is constantly present with us *in them*. He says, “As you do to the least of these, you do to me.” We have been clothed with power from on high, and we must *wield* whatever power and privilege we have in ways that show we believe that God is constantly present with us. *Because God is.*

And we get to be *reminded* of that today in this meal. As we share in Christ’s body and blood, we are reminded that Christ is present with us *here* and *now*, through the power of the Holy Spirit, strengthening and nourishing us to love God and love our neighbor. To bear witness to the world of Christ’s presence and power and rule and reign and grace and peace and forgiveness and love in this world and in our lives.

Christ has not left this world. He is just present in a different way that is a little harder to see. Because his Spirit is within each person – *every* person – so we just have to look a little deeper within each other and ourselves to see him. But when we *do*, we will be reminded of these last words, “I am *with you always*, to the end of the age.”