

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

MAKING DISCIPLES

How can we make disciples of all nations? That’s what Jesus told his disciples to do, and that’s what Jesus tells us to do. At least that’s how many have interpreted this passage.

In my experience I can’t make anybody do anything, and I certainly can’t make a person become a disciple. But, God in Christ, through the power of the Spirit can melt the coldest heart. God can and does bring salvation into the lives of His people.

But, what happens next? When people are born again, how can we make sure these baby Christians grow up?

The next step is discipleship. The next step is learning to follow Jesus. And God has given us the job of spiritual care. It is our responsibility to make disciples. It is our job to teach what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in what we say and in what we do.

Christian education is more than just learning some facts about the faith. It is a process of spiritual, ethical and intellectual formation that lasts for the lifetime of a believer. All of us are still in school. And we are instructed by our life together in the church.

So, what are these lessons that we must learn? How can we be faithful to this Great Commission? When it comes to disciple formation, I think there are three important elements.

The disciple-making church is community where faith and doubt are allowed to live side by side. The disciple-making church proclaims the eternal promises of God. And finally the disciple-making church provides an opportunity to experience faith through obedience.

In other words the disciple-making church is on the move. The disciple-making church believes in the promises of God more than the doubts and fears that surround it. The disciple-making church takes seriously the command to go into the world.

FAITH AND DOUBT

Even a resurrection was not enough to take away doubt of those first disciples. Did you notice the doubt in our lesson for today? When the disciples met the risen Christ on the mountain they worshipped him but some doubted. Actually, it is possible to translate that all who worshipped also doubted. In other words, there was some hesitation mingled with their worship.

I think this is instructive. Every church I have ever known has been a community in which faith and doubt lived side by side. Even as we worship God there is tinge of uncertainty. There is a sense that we need to know more. There is a sense that our faith is somehow incomplete.

But, notice that Jesus gives these doubting disciples the authority to make disciples. Doubt does not disqualify these disciples from the task of proclaiming the gospel.

Quite often we make excuses when it comes this charge to make disciples. We think that we don't know enough about the Bible. We think that our faith is not strong enough. We are worried that our doubt and uncertainty will get in the way of doing God's will.

Actually, this is a theme in the Bible. The people whom God called often doubted their ability to do the job. Moses complained that he wasn't a good speaker. The prophet Jeremiah complained that he was too young. The prophet Elijah complained that he didn't have enough help.

Those called to serve God in the Bible were often people filled with doubt as well as faith. In other words those called to proclaim God's liberating word of salvation were people just like you and me, imperfect people who were called to preach a word of grace.

I believe that God still calls imperfect people to proclaim a word of grace. We are all beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.

Sometimes we forget that the community of faith is also a community where doubt is also present. We sometimes see our doubts or the doubts of others as a threat to the faith.

But, I think that doubt can be the beginning of faith. As Frederick Buechner put it, doubts can be the "ants in the pants" of faith. Doubt can keep our faith awake and moving.

On the other hand, we can use doubt as an excuse not to do anything.

We can't wait until we are perfect and conditions are just right before we dare to go and make disciples for the kingdom. This is unrealistic. We are far from perfect. In many ways we are very foolish and uncertain.

But, I have seen some very imperfect people do significant ministry in the name of Jesus. Why?

Because they believed that God could use them despite their doubts and fears. They dared to believe that the wisdom of God could be proclaimed through the ministry of foolish and uncertain people.

(1 Corinthians 1:21)

THE PROMISE

The doubts and fears of those first disciples could have kept them on the mountaintop forever. But, Jesus didn't let that happen. Jesus met their doubts with a word of assurance.

To those who worshipped and doubted at the same time Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." And he concluded by saying, "I am with you always to the end of the age."

In other words, if God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31) If God was in Christ and Christ sends us out in his name, what do we have to fear? If the God who created heaven and earth promises to be with us to the end of the age (and beyond), why are we so upset and worried about the doubts and fears that we experience today?

Sometimes I think that many churches have a hard time applying the promises of God to the challenges that they face today. We say that God is with us to the end of the age. But, sometimes we act as if it all depends upon us. We focus too much upon our doubts and not enough upon what God has promised.

We don't have to have perfect pasts to take the message of the kingdom into the world. Indeed, sometimes those whose lives are broken in significant ways make the most powerful witness.

A preacher told of the powerful witness of a young man, a recovering alcoholic who prayed in the morning, "Thank you, God, for a new day of possibilities with you."

That's a good prayer for all of us to pray. We do not minimize the challenges and fears and doubts that come our way. We allow people and we allow ourselves to express them in a very direct and honest way.

But, as a community of faith we do not allow doubt to have the final word.

We believe that Jesus still comes to us and reminds us that God's kingdom doesn't depend upon us. God's kingdom doesn't depend upon what we can do.

The authority and power of God's kingdom resides with Jesus. And when we walk with Jesus each new day is a day filled with possibility and hope even though yesterday was filled with despair and regret.

GO INTO ALL THE WORLD

So, how do we make the transition from fear to faith? How can we honestly express our doubt and yet not let our doubt take over our lives? The answer is that we go. We refuse to stay on the mountain forever. We act upon our faith in the promises of God in Christ.

Jesus told the disciples, "Since all authority has been given to me, it is your job to go out into the world and preach that message. It's your job to just tell people the good news."

The way of God has been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In the resurrection of Jesus God turned the greatest doubt of all, the fear of death into the hope of life eternal. And the Spirit of that eternal hope, the Spirit of Christ is with you even today.

Much of our behavior is based upon the fear of what might happen.

Suppose we lose our job? Suppose we lose someone we love? Suppose something terrible happens to our country?

There is no end to the fears of what might happen to us.

Now those fears are realistic. Bad things can happen in our lives. Bad things could happen to our country. We are mortal and sometimes the fear of death and loss seems overwhelming.

But, what would life look like if those bad things did not have the final word? Suppose we did not even fear those who threatened to kill us?

That was the reality in the early church. Many people were martyred for the faith. But, it did not stop the church from proclaiming the message.

In fact there was saying in the early church that went like this, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

In other words the more the church was persecuted the faster it grew. Instead of discouraging the growth of the church the martyrdom of those early Christians brought about an increase in the church.

The powers that be sought to destroy the church through persecution, but their efforts had the opposite effect.

A TOMB THAT CAN'T BE SECURED

In Matthew's gospel the story of the Great Commission is preceded by the story of the resurrection.

I love the way Matthew tells it. The religious authorities come to Pilate and ask to put a guard on Jesus' tomb. They think that the disciples will come and steal the body of Jesus and then say that he has been raised from the dead.

Why the religious authorities were afraid of this I'll never know. The disciples ran away when confronted with the awful reality of the cross. Surely they wouldn't risk everything to perpetuate a hoax.

But, the religious authorities wanted to make sure, and Pilate gave the religious authorities what they wanted.

He gave them a guard of soldiers and said, "Make the tomb as secure as you can."

How secure do you need to make a tomb? It seems like the tomb is the last place that needs a guard!

The scene as I picture it is almost comic. The religious authorities direct Pilate's soldiers to plaster up the heavy stone to make sure that it doesn't roll away.

But, all their efforts are to no avail. Early the next morning an earthquake rolls the stone away and out of fear the soldiers fall down like dead men.

The Scripture does not say, but I think maybe these paralyzed soldiers heard what happened next.

The angel of the Lord told the women who had come to the tomb that Jesus had been raised.

He showed them the place where Jesus used to be, and he told them to go to the disciples and remind them of what Jesus had said. He would meet them in Galilee.

(On the way to see the disciples the women got this same message again. But, this time they get it from the risen Christ.)

Anyway some of these soldiers that were paralyzed with fear go and tell the religious authorities what happened. Can you imagine a group of hardened soldiers admitting that they were unable to secure a tomb?

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But, the religious authorities don't question the story. Instead, they try to cover up what has happened.

They tell the soldiers that come to them, "Say that the disciples came while we were asleep and stole the body. We'll pay you handsomely for your cooperation, and we'll make sure you don't get into trouble with Pilate."

Their plan could have worked. If Jesus had not been raised this story would have created just enough doubt to keep this story under wraps.

But, apparently the hush money didn't keep this story hushed up. Maybe some of the guards who didn't go to the authorities told the story. Or maybe some of the guards who were paid off decided to tell the truth anyway.

In any event the tomb was not strong enough to hold the risen Lord, and no cover-up could hide the truth.

The tomb was empty, and the risen Savior brought a message of power and hope to discouraged and doubting disciples.

THE JOURNEY WITH JESUS TODAY

The Spirit of the risen Lord is still with us today. And Jesus said that it is the job of the disciple to go into the world and bring that message of hope.

Death has lost its sting. God is with us and for us. God does not come into the world to condemn the world. God comes into the world to save the world. (John 3:16-17; 1 Corinthians 15; Romans 8)

That's why Jesus told his disciples to baptize in the name of the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It was a way of saying that God was in Christ and the Spirit of the risen Christ is still at work in the world today.

It's like that hymn we used to sing in the Baptist Church of my youth. "We serve a risen Savior; he's in the world today. He lives. He lives. Christ Jesus lives today."

That's a great hymn, and I believe that wonderful message. The power of the risen Christ is not limited to the then and there. The power of the risen Christ comes to us in the here and now. The power and authority of the risen Christ changes lives here and now.

And that's why the community of faith cannot stand still. Jesus didn't allow the disciples to stay on the mountaintop, and Jesus doesn't allow us to stay where we are either.

The challenge today is to learn how to go.

I sometimes think it doesn't matter so much where we go. We just have to recognize the fact that if we want to stay with Jesus we have to be willing to move, to follow where he leads.

The Bible (unlike other holy books) is not primarily a set of rules and regulations or a collection of pithy sayings. The Bible is about a journey of faith. It is a collection of faith stories. In the Old Testament we read about how the faith developed and grew through God's dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Bible tells how men and women were faithful despite the pressures of the world around them. An enslaved people learned to trust God in the wilderness and finally made their way to the Promised Land.

But, the story did not end. It continued and expanded. The Spirit of the living God was always on the move. And that Spirit became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus.

All of the gospels depict Jesus as on a journey and those who believe in Jesus as fellow travelers. If you were afraid to drop everything and go, you couldn't follow Jesus.

The early Christians spoke of the church as the Way. Jesus said that he was the way, the truth and the life.

This means that discipleship is more than just learning doctrines. It is being willing to take a journey with Jesus.

It is learning to think about the story of Jesus as our story develops. It is trying to understand where God might be leading us today.

The Spirit of Jesus does not make us content with who we are and where we are today. The Spirit of the risen Christ leads us forward. As the Bible puts it, "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation."

This is not good news for those of us who love the old ways. This is not good news for those of us who want to stay at home and never change. But, it is the best news ever for those of us who know how far we need to go.

Today I invite you to go with Jesus. Bring your doubts and your fears with you. We don't go because we have all the answers.

We go because in Jesus we see the grace and glory of God. We go because in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We go because Christ goes with us.

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And along the way we will make disciples. Along the way lives will be changed. Along the way we will be changed.

Don't worry about what will happen next. Just go where Jesus leads.

The risen Jesus went ahead of his disciples and waited for them on a mountain in Galilee, and Jesus goes ahead of us and waits for us as well.

He is with us always.

Amen.