

“A Charge and A Promise”

Matthew 28:11-20

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This morning we are picking up the Easter story in Matthew's Gospel right where we left it last week - the two Mary's have gone to the tomb and they are told by an angel and then by Jesus himself that they have an important job to do. They are to hurry and tell the disciples the good news, that Jesus is no longer dead in the tomb - he has been raised, just as he promised he would be - and that Jesus wants to meet them up in Galilee. With fear and great joy the women respond to this message - they become the first apostles and evangelists, carrying the good news that death doesn't have the last word - that what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead is a game change for the whole world. Let's follow the story as we turn to the eleventh verse of Matthew chapter 28 (Common English Bible):

Now as the women were on their way, some of the guards came into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. They met with the elders and decided to give a large sum of money to the soldiers. They told them, “Say that Jesus’ disciples came at night and stole his body while you were sleeping. And if the governor hears about this, we will take care of it with him so you will have nothing to worry about.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were told. And this report has spread throughout all Judea to this very day.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Matthew is a great story teller, able to weave together comedy and drama to make a captivating narrative. Before we get to today's main scene, when the disciples go up on the mountain to receive their final instructions from Jesus, we have a little comic relief. Remember those Roman guards who were literally scared frozen when the angel appeared at the tomb (28.3-4)? While the women are going to find the disciples to share the good news of the resurrection, the guards go to the religious authorities to give their report. Since the plan to keep Jesus sealed in the tomb has failed, the elders decide to go to plan B. They pay the guards a large sum of money to promote a big lie: that the disciples came at night while the guards were asleep, and then they stole Jesus' body. No

matter how hard they try to deny the truth of the resurrection, the Roman and religious authorities cannot contain the earthquaking, world rocking event of Easter! Jesus is on the loose now, and there is nothing that can be done to deny the power of God to bring life from death.

Now we fast forward to Galilee. Though we don't have the scene of the women giving their report to the disciples, we are told that the disciples listened to the witness of the women, which is no small feat. If you remember, the last time the disciples were on the scene we were told that all of them deserted Jesus and fled for fear (26:56). Now based on the testimony of the two Mary's, the disciples go all the way back to Galilee, up the mountain where Jesus had directed them. These last verses in Mathew's gospel are often referred to as the Great Commissioning. Up on the mountain top, the risen Lord instructs his friends to "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!" In the history of the church these verses have inspired missionaries who travel near and far, spreading the Good News of Jesus. Some have taken these verses to be a mandate for Christians to be triumphalists, to go out into the world to broadcast the superior message of the faith to those who may not know Jesus. But I think what we read in Matthew is something different. Before we break out into the "Hallelujah Chorus" or sing about "Our triumphant Holy Day!" let's not forget that things have not been easy for the disciples. By simply putting the number 11 into the text, we are reminded of the pain and brokenness of the community. Judas, the one who betrays Jesus with a kiss for thirty pieces of silver (26:47-49) - he can not forgive himself and instead takes his own life. So no longer do we have the perfect dozen - it's now eleven disciples who come up the mountain in Galilee.

We don't know how long it took the eleven to go from Jerusalem to Galilee - the trip is over 70 miles so it took at least several days on foot. And remember they have not seen the risen Lord yet - they are making the trip solely on the basis of the testimony of the two women. And when they finally get to the mountain and see Jesus, they do what the women did - they worship him. It doesn't say if they fall on the ground and grab Jesus' feet like the women did at the tomb, but regardless they worship him (28:17a).

But here is where things get interesting! Matthew not only tells us that when the eleven see Jesus they worship him, but they doubted, too. Most translations like the one I read today say "but some doubted." They all worshiped Jesus, but some doubted. Without going into the complexities of the grammar of the original language, which honestly is beyond me, we really don't know if the best translation is "and they all doubted" or "but some of them doubted." Regardless, worship and doubt are mixed in together - this is very similar to what we heard last week, that the women at the tomb had fear and great joy mixed together (28.8).

Before preparing for the Wednesday Bible study last week, I had never really thought about this question of doubt in this passage. The one disciple in the Bible who has received the label of doubting is Thomas - there's the famous passage in John's gospel when Thomas refuses to believe until he can touch the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands and touch Jesus' wounded side (John 20.24-25). It's as if he needed proof before he could believe that Jesus was really raised from the dead. But in this morning's passage we have a different thing going on than healthy skepticism. The doubt the disciples are experiencing here is different than the one experienced by Thomas. The word used here for doubt can also mean to hesitate or to waver. And the only other place in the entire Bible where this word for doubt is used is earlier in Matthew's gospel, back in chapter 14, the story of Peter being called by Jesus to walk out onto the water (Eugene Boring, [New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VIII](#), p.503). If you remember, when a storm batters the boat the disciples are in, they see someone they think is a ghost walking on the water. They cry out in fear, but Jesus tells them to take heart and not to be afraid - he is with them. Always being the outspoken one and questioning if it's really their Lord, Peter is invited by Jesus to walk out onto the water. So Peter gets out of the boat, starts walking on the water, and comes toward Jesus. But when he notices the strong wind, he becomes frightened, and begins to sink. Peter cries out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt? Why did you waver? Why did you not trust me?" (14.22-32).

For Matthew, discipleship has never been about being certain and right 100% of the time. It's never been about always being strong and never wavering. Those who knew Jesus the best, those who traveled with him and saw him heal people and teach with authority, these same ones are the ones Jesus commands to go out to make disciples of all the nations. And these eleven are a mix of faith and doubt, of loyalty and betrayal. ***I am afraid sometimes the church has given the message that if you are to be used by God to do God's work in the world, then you have to have your act completely together.*** You have to have a certain level of faith, a certain amount of knowledge about the scripture, a certain level of maturity spiritually. But the gospel of Jesus Christ shows us a different way. New Testament scholar Stan Saunders puts it like this: "discipleship is lived between worship and doubt, between betrayal and brokenness and the reality of the resurrection" (Saunders, [Preaching the Gospel of Matthew](#), p. 301). This means all of us are qualified to be disciples! To be human is to be filled with doubt and faith, hope and fear. I believe in many ways we are all like Peter, walking out boldly in faith one moment and then seeing that we are wavering the next. Or maybe those are happening at the same time! But the good news my friends is that Jesus is the One who can save us! He is the One to whom "all authority in heaven and on earth" has been given. He is the One who has the authority to calm even the storms at sea. And he is the One who sends us out into the world to make disciples, to witness to the Kingdom of Heaven, inviting people to walk in God's ways and not in the ways of the world. ***You see, the good news is that it has never been about us, but it has always been about what God is up to in the world!*** And for

some reason God does not choose angels or perfect believers to accomplish the mission - no, God entrusts the mission to us, to “the worshipping / wavering community of disciples” (Boring, [New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VIII](#), pp. 502-503).

If you ever doubted God has a sense of humor, remember that God's promise to bless all the nations of the world began with Abraham and Sarah, an older couple who could no longer have kids. God said to them, “Go... go from your country and your kindred to a land that I will show you...” and your descendants will be a blessing to the whole world. (Genesis 12.1). The same voice came to Moses years later: “Go, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt (Exodus 3.10). Remember, Moses was not a perfect man - he in fact murdered an Egyptian and hid out for years as a refugee (Exodus 2.11-22). But when God's call came to him, he obeyed the command, and through generations of faithful and not-so-faithful people God's promise lived on. And now the promise is being kept through Jesus, the son of Abraham, the Son of David, the Son of God - the same one who tells his followers to “Go” and make disciples of all the nations (Long, [Matthew - Westminster Bible Companion](#), p.326).

This is a big calling, and at times it can be daunting to try and discern what God is calling us to do here and now. The first mission trip I participated in was knocking on doors and handing out New Testament Bibles - this was a good thing to do but I don't think it's exactly what Jesus had in mind when he commanded us to make disciples. Presbyterian preacher and teacher Tom Long warns against hit-and-run evangelism, the type of mission when you “hurl gospel leaflets into the wind or hold a rally in a stadium” Instead, Jesus calls us “to the harder, less glamorous, more patient task of making disciples, of building Christian communities. A disciple is, of course a student, and the task before the church is helping others to become students of God's will” (Long, p. 326). I am grateful for our faithful and patient Sunday School teachers who dedicate hours each week to their classes. And I am thankful for those of you who teach others by the lives of service you lead quietly at home or at work. Those of us who are parents know that our kids are learning about God's kingdom through the lives we are living. Talk about a daunting task! But no matter how hard of a job it is to be a follower of Jesus, and no matter how inadequate we may feel, we must never forget the promise that ends the gospel of Matthew. It's the promise Jesus makes that he will be with us always - each and every day, as we try to live out our faith with hope and fear and yes, even doubt. We belong to a God who not only charges us to “Go” but also promises to be with us in all things. Thanks be to the God we know in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us (1.23)!