Matthew 28:16-20

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.17When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.18And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’\*

***Go, Despite Your Doubts***

1. Background

Let’s paint the backdrop for today’s lesson. The Gospel of Matthew presents a rich, colorful, and slightly chaotic description of Jesus’ resurrection. Roman soldiers guard the entrance to the tomb. Suddenly the earth trembles, an angel appears and rolls back the boulder that’s sealing the tomb, and the soldiers are scared stiff and probably fainted. The women who come to anoint the body of Jesus find this angel sitting on the boulder and the two guards who have passed out, and the angel tells them that Christ is risen and to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where Jesus will meet them. The women run to do as they are told and meet Jesus on the way, who repeats the angel’s instructions; “Tell the disciples to go to Galilee; I’ll see them there.” Meanwhile, across town, the priests have gotten the news from some of the guards about what happened at the tomb, and the priests bribe them to spread rumors that Jesus’ disciples came and stole the body.

The disciples head for Galilee, about a three day hike from Jerusalem, obeying the orders of the women who tell them that Jesus and the angel told them to go. Some of them must be thinking, “What am I doing?” Remember that the disciples are going sight unseen; they haven’t seen Jesus or heard from him since the crucifixion, and human experience would tell them that they shouldn’t expect to hear from him or see him again. But they go to Galilee nonetheless. And when they meet Jesus there, there are mixed feelings: they worship him, but some doubt. There is enthusiasm and uncertainty, excitement and fear, especially since Jesus tells them to “go and make disciples of all nations.” Who’s going to believe that Jesus has risen?

Our mixed nature

But it is exactly the nature of discipleship to “go” in spite of our reservations, our fears, our doubts. All of us share a common feature with the man described in the Gospel of Mark, whose son was possessed by demons and who pleaded with Jesus to heal his son. Jesus told the man, “All things are possible for those who believe,” to which the man responded, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

All of us struggle with our doubts. We don’t revere the disciples, giving them the title Saint Matthew, Saint Peter, etc. because these were men of great faith – it’s noteworthy that today’s reading doesn’t say “some worshiped and some doubted;” It says “They worshiped, but some doubted.” We come together on Sunday to pray and to sing praises and to worship and to listen to the word and to celebrate because Jesus promises to meet us here. We speak of Christ’s resurrection, of eternal life, of God’s wondrous works, and we bring our doubts with us, just as the disciples did when they went to Galilee to meet Jesus. And like the disciples, it’s quite possible for us to worship and doubt at the same time.

A Mustard Seed Is All that Matters

Some might question his decision to send *all* the disciples out to make more disciples. Shouldn’t he have sent the ones of stronger faith and kept the others back for a remedial course in faith, done some additional miracles for those who struggled with doubt so that they would be absolutely convinced of Jesus’ resurrection and divinity? Instead Jesus addresses the whole group, both the strong and the weak, saying, “Go.” Jesus once said that if we had a mustard seed of faith, we could move mountains (Matthew 17:20). His point in saying this was that none of us have a lot of faith, and what’s important is not the quantity of faith that we have but rather the simple fact that we have a smidgen of it. Having it is what matters; that’s the only criterion for discipleship. Jesus tells all of us to “go and make disciples,” despite our doubts. Even those who we might classify as movers and shakers in Church history had less faith than this. John Wesley, someone we Methodists often praise for his commitment and service to Christ, was, nonetheless a man plagued with doubt. At one point, Wesley was ready to throw in the towel, feeling himself quite the hypocrite for preaching something that he himself so doubted. When he confessed his doubts to his friend and fellow preacher Peter Bohler, Peter told Wesley, “preach faith until you have it, then because you have it you will preach it.” Wesley’s choice to follow Bohler’s advice confirms that he had the requisite morsel of faith that eventually led Wesley to become one of the great preachers of all time.

Faith and the Abundant Life

It’s the mustard seed of faith in our lives that seems to make all the difference. Most of us know the fear and doubt that accompany a marriage. “Should I ask her to marry me, or not?” “Should I accept his proposal, or not?” The same doubts and fears accompany our decision to become parents. “Am I ready to be father? A mother? And what if our child has some problem, some disability?” Even our choices to pursue a career are led by faith; you *believe* that you can pass the test, finish the class work, meet or exceed the criteria. One could easily argue that our lives would be quite a bit simpler, more predictable, indeed more controllable if we never endeavored into marriage or parenthood or a skilled profession, and the same is true about being a disciple; it’s easier to NOT tell others about relationship with God. It’s easier NOT to endure the smirks and puzzled expressions as people ask in shock or amusement, “So you’re a Christian?” “You really *believe* that stuff?” And our doubts can easily lead us to back down and answer something like, “Well I go to church. I’m still searching. I’m not sure, but…” And so every time this passage in Matthew, commonly referred to as “the Great Commission,” is read, or preached on, we have this tinge of guilt. “Go and make disciples of all nations.” You say to yourself, “I’m not going and I’m not making.” Sometimes I think that we act more like Peter acted *before* Jesus’ resurrection than after, hiding in the shadows and hoping that no one asks me if we know him. “Jesus *who?*.” Or we go, but we say nothing, and instead wait for others to ask us, “Are you a Christian? Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” You’re not alone; I feel it to. Most of the time I’m not wearing this collar, and out there people can’t tell that I’m a Christian because I don’t tell them. I’ll tell you, up until I went on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic, the boldest evangelistic move I ever made, the loudest I proclaimed Christ outside the church walls, was reading a “Christian” book on the Long Island Railroad. I was quite an evangelist! One day, however, I was reading it, and the gentleman next to me started asking me questions about it, and I thought, “Here’s my chance to share my faith.” It turns out that the guy next to me was a born-again Christian – so much for evangelism! Yet God used my little effort to evangelize to connect me with another Christian, who put me in touch with another Christian, and we began having Bible studies on the LIRR, and people who could hear our prayers and reading and discussions sometimes asked questions. I don’t know how many lives might have been touched by our tacit and tepid evangelism, but I know that I was encouraged and strengthened and inspired to pray and read and study and seek fellowship, and I made two great friends. All from this small step of reading a “Christian” book in a public place.

If you had never asked the person you loved to marry you, how would your life be different today? If you had not accepted the proposal of that nervous guy, where would you be today? If you did not risk *believing* that your marriage would last, if you had not risked having children, if you had not believed that you had what it takes to be a husband, a wife, a mother, *a father,* a firefighter, a police officer, a minister, what would life be like today? Regardless of all the struggles and strife and turmoil, the late nights, the pain, the failures and disappointments, I believe that you can look back upon anything you pursued in faith and say, “It was worth it.” Even if things didn’t all go the way you had hoped, it was worth it.

Making Disciples Means *Being* a Disciple

Jesus commands us to “go and make disciples.,” and we need not travel far to find those who are in need of Christ’s healing, who may also have just the mustard seed of faith that can change their life. Our problem is that we don’t have much experience in sharing Christ. Many are excellent servants in the church who secretly pray, “God, let this be enough service, because I’m totally uncomfortable sharing my faith in words. Somebody’s going to laugh. Somebody’s going to think I’m a nut. Somebody’s going to stop inviting me to parties. I’ll come to church. I’ll sing. I’ll even shout ‘hallelujah’ when the preacher prompts me. But, God, don’t make me ‘go’ and ‘make disciples.’ Don’t make me convert people.” This can be a serious roadblock for us, because our reluctance to “go and make disciples” makes us feel guilty before God. Then we try to avoid God to avoid having those pangs of guilt or shame, and soon we stop coming to church. This solves our problem about “going and making disciple” because we can honestly say that we’re no longer sold on being a disciple of Christ, so we’re off the hook when it comes to making disciples of other people. God no longer holds an important place in our lives; so why should we sell that idea others?

The first and fundamental step in making a disciple is *being* a disciple. That means Christ must be important in your life. You need to recognize his presence, see how he works in relationships, in every day experiences. When you wake up, say, “Good morning, Lord” and trust that you’re not crazy: GOD IS PRESENT IN YOUR LIFE AND BE JOYFUL BECAUSE HE *IS!* Don’t get bogged down trying to justify God’s existence – merely accept it, the same way you accept the love of your father or mother or husband or wife without trying to explain it.

Next, I encourage you to talk about your relationship with God. Start practicing *here,* where you might feel a little safer. Practice speaking about God, sharing your experiences with others. You may be surprised to find someone else who has had a similar experience, a similar dilemma, or holds similar doubts. Remember that you’re called to *witness*, not persuade or convince. Simply sharing your experience with God will draw others to Him.

Finally, don’t be afraid: embrace that mustard seed of faith and believe Jesus’ promise that he will be with us to the end of the age.