

“But Some Doubted”

May 18, 2008 Trinity Sunday (1st Sunday after Pentecost) Year A

Lectionary Readings

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

I have read Matthew 28 many times, and have even preached on the “Great Commission.” Nevertheless, I never before really noticed that phrase, “but some doubted.” Now Jesus had many followers. There were the crowds of people who followed him from place to place, wanting to hear his words, and sometimes to be healed. There was a smaller core group, the disciples, in Luke they are numbered at 70 or 72, who Jesus sends out ahead of him to every town where he was about to go. Then there were the twelve apostles, to whom Jesus gives “authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.” Jesus said of them, “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes someone known to be a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes someone known to be righteous will receive a righteous person's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is known to be my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly be rewarded.” Jesus did not choose them because they were special, but they became special because Jesus chose them.

In Matthew, these twelve were present at the last supper and in John, Jesus washed their feet. Now these eleven—Judas Iscariot has died—have followed the risen

Christ to a mountain in Galilee. Of all people, these eleven are closest to Jesus and have witnessed his power heal, to cast out demons, even to walk on water. The Son has granted them authority, he has acknowledged them to his Father, and has given them the Holy Spirit to speak for them when they are in trouble. Yet among these eleven, standing before the risen Christ, there are doubts. If they doubted, can we say that we can do much better?

I might speculate that the doubts of the eleven fell into two categories. First, they might have had doubts about who Jesus was. Second, they might have had doubts about who they—the disciples—were. Jesus confronts the first doubt head-on by reminding the disciples just who he is—“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Since Jesus has come to give the eleven a job to do, this should be enough to establish his authority to direct them, and their authority to carry out his orders. Here is a good time to stop and ask your self, “Do I fully accept that Jesus has complete authority over my life?” Sometimes when we are feeling strong and good, we may start to believe that we have the power to succeed on our own, without Jesus’ help and direction. Trying to do good without God rarely comes out well in the end, and often leads to outright rebellion against God’s will for us.

The first step to acknowledging Christ’s authority is getting to know him better. Read the Gospels and put yourself in the place of the disciples, following Jesus through Galilee, witnessing his healing and forgiveness. Look for evidence of Christ’s power in your life and the lives around you. If you are reluctant to acknowledge Christ’s authority, consider the alternative. Whom else, or what else, would you want to have “all authority

in heaven and on earth?” I do not know of anyone else who is, even remotely, up for the job!

If you feel that you are tending towards rebellion, do not lose heart. Being in rebellion means that you are starting to understand what God intends for you, but you just do not like it. I recommend periodically offering up your willfulness as a sacrifice to God and asking in the name of Jesus Christ that your will be brought into conformance with God’s will for you. Focus on loving Christ and you may find it much easier to follow his commandments.

However, I do not really think that these were the most difficult doubts for the eleven to deal with. How could they seriously doubt Jesus’ identity and authority? After all, they were in the presence of a living man, who just a few days before was hanging dead on a cross. If that does not establish Jesus’ authority, I do not know what could. No, I think they were dealing with the second area of doubt, whether they were up to the task of continuing as apostles after Jesus goes to the Father.

Here is where things get tough. You have put Jesus in the center of your world. You have a bumper sticker that says, “God isn’t my copilot, he’s my pilot.” You are just getting comfortable with being a disciple, a pupil. Like Peter on the mountaintop, you want to say to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” However, Jesus wants you to come down from the mountain and hit the Gospel road. His intention is to grow “disciples” into “apostles,” those who are sent forth. At this point, you may want to agree that it is important for SOMEONE to go forth to spread the Gospel, but point out that you are not at all qualified for the job. Maybe you are too young, too old, too shy, too tired. Is not that work for professional pastors and missionaries? After all, we pay the pastor’s

salary and send offerings to global missions. Why should we have to go in person? You may feel that you have enough Faith in Jesus to go to heaven, but not enough to go next door. You know Jesus said that a little faith could move mountains, but it seems to take a lot of Faith to “get off the dime.”

There is a time to lie down beside still waters, but there is also a time to get up and move. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that through the Holy Spirit, “rivers of living water will flow from within” each believer.” A faithful heart is a bubbling spring, not a stagnant puddle! Sometimes I feel that we are so concerned with our personal salvation that we do not pay much attention with what we are supposed to do once we are saved by grace. There is *more* to salvation than “go forth and sin no more.” That “*more*” is the Great Commission. Making disciples, baptizing, and spreading the good news are the great deeds that Christ call us to do. Without these deeds, faith grows stagnant and dies. Jesus did not call us to the Great Commission because he needs our help. He calls us to this great work because doing the work will keep our faith alive.

As I have said before, the Longest Journey begins with a single step. Each of us must take that step in our own way, and then continue putting one foot in front of the other for the rest of our lives. We can only carry out the Great Commission one day at a time, using our God-given abilities and gifts. This may sound a bit abstract, so I will give a simple example. Now, I am not holding myself up as a paragon of Evangelism. I do not make a notch in my belt every time I think I have saved a soul for Christ. However, I do some small things, which with God’s help, may have a big impact on someone. One of these things is to carry a Bible with me as much as possible. This is not exactly typical of our faith tradition. I often find that in a meeting of pastors, I am the only one carrying a

Bible. I am always amazed at how often that Bible serves as a useful reference for the group. I also tend to read my Bible in public places. This suits my temperament, because I prefer to read with some activity around me. Earlier in the week, I was grabbing a quick breakfast at McDonald's before heading down to Sikeston for work. One of the young men working there was on his break, and he came over and asked me, "is that a Bible?" He told me that he had never seen anyone reading a Bible in McDonald's and indicated that he was happy to see me reading it. I was in a hurry; I simply said to him, "starting the day with the Word seems to make it easier to get through any difficulties that come up." He nodded in agreement. I had to smile, because as I was leaving, I overheard him asking an older couple at the next table, "Why don't you bring your Bible to breakfast?" I am not saying that this was an earthshaking achievement, but it was a small step towards living with the Great Commission.

The Gospel notes that among the eleven "some doubted." With God's help and the power of the Holy Spirit that they received on Pentecost, the eleven became thousands, then millions, and today billions of Christians. There is no reason that we cannot continue in their footsteps. However, we it seems like, in the words of the song, "our get up and go, got up and went." We are like the church in Laodicea, addressed in Revelation 3, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."

Do not be lukewarm! Let the Holy Spirit to set your heart on fire for spreading the Gospel. Sometimes I think that we are so afraid of stepping out of our comfort zone that

we keep a spiritual fire extinguisher handy to put out the Holy Spirit whenever it flares up. Our response to the Great Commission seems to boil down to a struggle between our Faith and our fears. You can overcome your fears, but only if you are willing to have the faith to call upon Christ for help. In Matthew 8, when the storm came up on the Lake and Jesus was sleeping in the boat, “The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"” There was no need for them to be afraid, for Jesus was with them. He is with us today.

Amen.

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