

“Perfect Faith – Imperfect Disciples”
Matthew 28:16-20; Psalm 33:1-12

The years have dimmed my mental photograph of her. I do recall she was graced with long, blond hair and a wry smile. I now realize that with her petite figure, high heels, and closely tailored clothes, she was a beautiful woman. Likely, she was in her early to mid-thirties. But with the eyes of a sixteen year old boy, I only saw her as an old lady.

She served as both my homeroom and English teacher. Intelligent, witty, and combative, depending on your personality, she could be the teacher of your dreams, or your worst nightmare. And for some of us, she served as both.

Mrs. Marshall, we never called or even knew our teachers’ first names, fiercely struggled to teach eastern Kentucky young people that the President did not live in “Warshington,” nor did one “warsh” clothes. “Washington” and “wash” did not roll easily off our tongues. Likewise we found it difficult to inquire of a person’s location without that one extra important word: “Where is Jimmy...at?” But none of these lessons, nor ones concerning dangling participles or paragraph construction, are the reason I remember Mrs. Marshall.

Rather, she remains a fixture in my mind, and heart, because of that one semester when periodically the topic veered from English to religion. For a few glorious, never to be repeated, weeks Mrs. Marshall laughed, cajoled, challenged, and probed as we discussed the Christian faith. It only occurred a handful of times, but of all the hours I spent in her class, it is what I most remember.

Although the facts were never enunciated, apparently Mrs. Marshall’s husband had been a seminary trained Baptist minister. But something had gone terribly wrong in his church, and he was now engaged in secular employment. Whatever had occurred, my teacher still carried the scars. Organized religion, the Church, and theological ignorance remained firmly in her cross hairs. She wasn’t negative about the faith. In fact, later on it became obvious to me she was a true believer. Yet, her intelligence, knowledge, and personal experience had made her aware of the pitfalls of an uninformed Christianity. Mercilessly, she could carve up simplistic explanations of creation, the resurrection, or biblical interpretation. Quickly, she could point out the flaws of a church populated by fallible human beings.

Being the grandson and nephew of preachers, raised on the infallible word of the King James Bible, I believed it my divine responsibility to root

out her faithless heresy. My willingness to enter into spirited debate was only matched by my lack of knowledge. The discussions were heated and uncompromising. I loved every minute of it. They came to an abrupt halt when one of the other students went home crying about what she perceived as an attack on her beliefs. One parental phone call to the principal silenced the theological discussion.

At the time I labeled Mrs. Marshall a doubter, someone struggling with her faith. Looking back, I realize what I viewed as doubt pushed me to understand what I believed, forced me to consider the faith from a different perspective, made me a better Christian.

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.”

One of the best things about the Bible is its honesty, which we often miss because it occurs so subtly. That is the case here in what is commonly called “The Great Commission.” After Jesus’ resurrection the disciples, minus betrayer Judas Iscariot, meet Him on a prearranged mountain. Here, he directs them to go out into all the world “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Matthew ends his book with this high calling to ministry using words we still employ in our baptismal ceremonies.

From the very beginning of Christianity, this passage, this directive has stood at the center of what Jesus calls us to do. Besides the resurrection itself, those may be no more important, or instructive, incident in the entire New Testament. Meeting together on that designated mountain, before the disciples stands the magnificent, resurrected Christ. Verse seventeen says, “When they saw him, they worshipped him...,” which literally means they prostrated themselves in worship. “...but some doubted.”

The passage does not make it clear who doubted, or what they doubted. Were there other followers of Jesus there besides the eleven apostles? Were they the ones doubting, or some of the eleven? And what were they doubting? That he was resurrected? Or that the one before them was truly Jesus? All we know for certain is that some of the faithful who were invited to meet Jesus on that mountain, when confronted by the resurrected Christ instead of worshipping, doubted.

An older gentleman was on the operating table awaiting surgery and he insisted that his son, a renowned surgeon, perform the operation. As he was about to receive the anesthesia he asked to speak to his son. “Yes, Dad, what is it?” “Don’t be nervous, son,” said the father, “do you best and just

remember, if it doesn't go well, if something happens to me...your mother is going to come and live with you and your wife."

Even in the best of situations, with the best of people, doubt can sometimes enter our minds.

Likely, most of us when reading this passage never noticed those three little words: "but some doubted." Matthew doesn't make a big deal of it. And the central theme of these verses is found in The Great Commission. So, our first question is: How in the world could these people doubt?

For three years they had watched Jesus heal the sick and raise the dead. Lives were changed both spiritually and physically. He spoke with authority, challenging minds and touching hearts. He told them this would happen. And now he stands before them — the resurrected Christ, the victor over sin and death, the Son of God — "...but some doubted." How could they doubt what was before their very eyes?

Maybe for some of them it was just too good to be true. Surely there had to be another explanation. A man rising from the dead — possessing the ability to wipe away sins — come on! And we understand this feeling. We have watched a commitment to Christ change lives — alcoholics turn sober, workaholics rediscover their family, the guilt ridden start fresh and new. And yet, we doubt he can do it for us.

Or, maybe they doubted that day on the mountain because they suddenly realized what all of this meant to them. At its heart, was their doubt an excuse for their lack of commitment? Would it have really mattered who he was and what he had done? Had they made it impossible to satisfy their unbelief? As they stood there staring at the One who had been raised from the dead did they mentally tally up the cost of following him and choose doubt over commitment?

One day, Little Johnny asked his grandma how old she was. Grandma answered, "Thirty-nine and holding." Little Johnny thought for a moment and said, "How old would you be if you let go?"

Were the disciples holding onto their doubt because they were afraid of where they would land if they let go?

So, what happens? Some worship, some doubt. What does Jesus do? Nothing. Once we are told some doubted and some worshipped, everything is the same. Their doubt does not keep Jesus from speaking to them, or calling them to discipleship. The doubters receive exactly the same information and call to service as do those who worship Jesus. Jesus obviously knows who is doubting him because even Matthew can tell. But

Jesus does not exclude them, doesn't berate them, doesn't even point them out. He includes them, just as they are.

Nor does Jesus allow their doubt to frustrate him, or prevent him from calling the disciples to their mission. The text betrays no sign of discouragement or second thoughts about whether they should go forward. Rather, Jesus straightforwardly tells them what God wants, and expects, them to do. God's work would proceed. Their discussion was whether they would be a part of it.

Cartoonist Gary Trudeau, of "Doonesbury" fame, in a commencement address at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut said:

"The impertinent question is the glory and engine of human inquiry. Copernicus asked it and shook the foundations of Renaissance Europe. Darwin asked it and redefined humankind's very sense of itself. Thomas Jefferson asked it and was so invigorated by the asking that he declared it one of our inalienable rights. Two hundred years later, Martin Luther King asked it, and forced the country to honor those rights. Daniel Defoe asked the impertinent question and invented the novel. James Joyce asked it and reinvented the novel, which was promptly banned. Jean Paul Sartre asked it and inspired Simone de Beauvoir, who asked it and inspired a whole generation of women to question what they were doing with men like Jean Paul Sartre. The Wright Brothers asked it and were ignored for five years. Bill Gates asked it and was ignored for five minutes, which was long enough for him to dominate the industry."

Jesus' Great Commission was an impertinent question. The important decision each disciple that day, and today, must conclude was not whether or not to doubt it, but whether or not to answer it and follow it.

So, if Jesus goes on just like none of them doubted, why does Matthew tell us they did? Doesn't it sort of ruin this perfect scene of divine commissioning? It would have been just as simple to leave these three words out.

I believe Matthew relates this uncertainty for a very important reason, because it encourages us. Look at the commissioning scenes throughout scripture — Moses, Isaiah, Jonah, the Apostle Paul. What characteristics do they share? The one being called always responds with reluctance, with doubt.

Isn't this how most of us come to faith, still respond to the faith? Faith is often a process. Typically, we react to new ideas negatively. Seeing the resurrection for the first time, some of the disciples thought: "This just can't be!" And much of the time Christ's call to us provokes a "I can't believe, think, or do that!" Matthew's words are encouraging because he reminds us it has always been this way. God's call often discovers reluctance before acceptance. Throughout its history the Church has been a mixture of faith and doubt, both in its body and in each of us individually. From that day on the mountain to this sanctuary this morning, the Christian faith has always been a perfect call to imperfect disciples.

In his book, Soul Survivor: How I Survived the Church, well known author and recently a Heritage Lecturer here at Westminster, Philip Yancey profiles people who through their writing served as spiritual mentors for him, often by hearing their struggles in a fallible community of faith. One of these is author Annie Dillard. Discussing her life, Yancey notes that she admitted she did experience one brief rebellion against God. After four summers at church camp, Dillard returned home from the last one fed up with the church hypocrisy of people attending to show off their clothes. Terrified of the senior minister whom Dillard described as looking "exactly like James Mason in A Star Is Born and his idea of a sermon was a book review," she instead accosted the assistant minister, barging into his study and haranguing him about church hypocrisy.

Yancey writes:

A wise man, in one fell swoop he accomplished for her what took me many years: he separated the church from God, and did so in a way that dignified, rather than demeaned, his teenage critic. [Dillard said] "He was an experienced, calm man in a three-piece suit; he had a mustache and wore glasses. I was this little high school kid who thought I was the only person in the world with complaints against the church. He heard me out and then said, 'You're right, honey, there is a lot of hypocrisy.'" Annie felt her arguments dissolve. Then the minister proceeded to load her down with books by C.S. Lewis, which, he suggested, she might find useful for a senior class paper. "This is rather early of you, to be quitting the church," he remarked as they shook hands in parting. "I suppose you'll be back soon."

The Church has always been full of doubters who didn't allow that uncertainty to stop them from being a part of God's work and will.

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When we read Matthew’s story of the Great Commission, we wonder how in the world those disciples, staring at the resurrected Christ, could have doubted. If given an opportunity to respond, they would likely reply: “The same way each of us can stare at our lives filled with incredible blessings and still doubt that God loves us.” This passage comforts us when we consider our struggle to believe the resurrection or contemplate how to integrate the divine will into our everyday lives.

But it should also remind us doubt is not a valid excuse for inactivity. Jesus called all his disciples, even the doubters, to fulfill The Great Commission, “to go out into all the world baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

This morning, Jesus calls each and every one of us, even those of us who doubt, to go out into the world proclaiming a love and forgiveness we have seen with our eyes, experienced in our hearts, and sometimes doubted with our minds.

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April 15, 2018