



Worship Series: “Do This In Remembrance . . .”

“Remember About Purpose”

Sermon Text: Matthew 28:16-20

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

Trinity Sunday: 11 June 2017

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“If you wish to know what a man is, place him in authority” (Yugoslav Proverb).

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16 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” (Matthew 28:16-20).

Our purpose today is to teach a lesson about how to obey the God revealed in Jesus—and the doubt therein. In the Bible mountains play a pivotal role, particularly when God reveals some truth or another to those who profess faith in God. During the flood, Noah’s ark, carrying precious cargo, came to rest on Mount Ararat (Genesis 8:4). It was on Mount Moriah that God told Abraham to carry his son for sacrifice (Genesis 22). Moses meets God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:20), and the word from one of our youngster’s favorite hymns, El Shaddai (# 123; *UM Hymnal*) means literally, “God of the Mountains.” It is upon the mountain that Moses receives the Ten Commandments. Mount Gilboa is where King Saul dies (1 Samuel 31:8).

Likewise, the New Testament is full of divine revelation on mountains. Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount and prior to that “the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (Matthew 4:8). The Mount of Transfiguration is where God reveals Jesus’ glory most explicitly to Peter, James, and John. Last, God glorifies Jesus on a place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull)” (Mark 15:22). When we read the word “mountain(s)” in Scripture, we should notice that something important is afoot.

Today’s lesson tells us “the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.” This means that what will happen has great import for believers.

Then Matthew seems to throw some sand in our gearbox. We read, “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Of all the places in Matthew’s story to advance the concept of doubt, this seems an odd location for this all-too-human hobgoblin of the creature’s psyche. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” What is this report about doubt doing here?

Perhaps one reason this phrase appears is because Matthew was enough of a student of human behavior to recognize that doubt is always an ever present additive of faith. All believers have moments/periods of doubt—even the original disciples. We need to look no further than Thomas, who earned the eternal nickname “Doubting Thomas,” if only because he articulated out loud his own doubts about Jesus. Interestingly, however, it was only until a few years ago that we tried to legislate doubt out of American life. As a culture we tried to hold doubt to a minimum. Let me give an example. One Sunday afternoon in about 1964, I lost my last baseball over Mr. Shultz’s fence. He was generally a dour and hostile neighbor, but I dutifully went to his house to ask for our baseballs back. No one answered the door and his two German Shepherds made climbing the fence and extremely bad idea. So I tried a different plan. I asked my father if he would take me to buy a couple of new baseballs.

However, my father offered an argument about why he could not take me. He explained to be about the “Missouri Blue Laws,” which were pieces of legislation that forbade anyone from buying anything on Sunday, with only some life and death exceptions—of which new baseballs were not included.

For better or worse, those Sunday Blue Laws reminded even the most pagan among us that, as a culture, we all had at least a passing familiarity with the Christian faith and its claim on our day to day life. Of course, that was in 1964. Today all that has changed dramatically. Today on Sunday you can buy just about anything you want. Today, there are more Muslims in the United States than there are United Methodists. Today, “Cultural Christianity” is a distant

relic of our American past. Today, to honor and keep the Sabbath holy takes a far more conscious decision than we have experienced since the early frontier days in America. Today on Sunday, we must recognize that the church is not the only show in town. Why should we be surprised that Matthew reminds us that “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted?” We doubt today and many are quite proud of it.

A few years ago at a wedding rehearsal dinner I had this dialogue with the bride:
Where is your church? I am not sure.
Well, where do you go to church? I don't.
Have you ever gone to church? No.
Aren't you baptized? I don't think so. Should I be?

These kinds of people are not atypical anymore. So why should we be surprised that Matthew tells us that “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” As I read this phrase over and over, it disturbs me. How could the disciples doubt?
Jesus had preached and ministered to these eleven.
They had heard Jesus teach with authority.
They had seen Jesus cleanse lepers.
They had heard him pray for the infirmed.
They had seen Jesus heal a paralytic and Peter's mother-in-law.
These disciples had left everything to be his disciples—but some doubted.

What is positive or blessed about doubt? If we had been there with Jesus, we would have certainly not doubted, would we? We Christian folk, twenty-one centuries later, seem to see more clearly than those with Jesus every day for three years.

A television commentator, speaking about the judge who ruled that a rock band had violated community standards of moral decency in Florida said, “I guess the judge was ticked off that he couldn't get Madonna tickets.” And we wonder why Matthew reminds us that, “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Today's cynicism, often disguised as doubt, is the new, contemporary and up-dated version of faith. So, how can the phrase, “but some doubted,” be of any comfort to us?

We can understand doubt, in most positive sense, as sort of a check and balance for faith. Doubt, as Frederic Buechner noted, “Is the ants in the pants of faith.” Doubt always pushes us farther and deeper into faith and faith’s discipleship.

Faith is not what every reasonable red-blooded American can believe if they meditate on the gospel long enough or have it drummed into them hard enough. Faith is the decision to accept the gift God holds out to each of us. Doubt underlines the vital essence of what commitment to God both gives and demands. When Matthew tells us that “some doubted,” Matthew reminds us that faith is a decision and that doubt is one of several alternatives.

Matthew and Jesus might have well agreed with what Tertullian once wrote: “Christians are made, not born.” Amen.

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Benediction: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace”
(Numbers 6:24-26).