

Introduction

“The eleven disciples are on their way to Galilee.” At the beginning, there had been a dozen but now there are 12 no longer. Judas is gone. He left quietly to do the unspeakable. First, he betrays Jesus. Then, before the news of Jesus’ resurrection can reach out to save him, Judas commits suicide. It’s tragic, and now it’s as if the diminished group of disciples walks with a limp. They are **on their way to Galilee, “headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion.”** But now there are only 11.

I

Matthew tells us that the moment they see the risen Christ, **“they worship him.”** Then he adds, **“but some doubted.”** Actually, it literally says, **“And they worshipped him and they doubted.”** What a contorted combination—they worshipped *and* they doubted. But think about it. Isn’t that what most of us will do here this morning? We may think that we are supposed to check our doubts at the door, hand them to an usher in return for a bulletin. But faith doesn’t work that way. Wherever we meet the risen Christ we are likely to both worship Him and doubt. Don’t let anyone kid you. Nobody has faith like a bank vault where doubt can never break in. We all have haunting questions. Why her? Why us? Why that? Why now? And so it is when the risen Lord first appears to the 11 disciples. Luke describes Christ’s appearance in Jerusalem this way. **They thought they were seeing a ghost and were scared half to death. Jesus said, “Don’t be upset, and don’t let all these doubting questions take over. Look at my hands, look at my feet—it’s really me. Touch me. Look me over from head to toe. A ghost doesn’t have muscle and bone like this.” As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. They still couldn’t believe what they were seeing. It was too much; it seemed too good to be true.”** Yes, even **“in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”** (Luke 24:37-41) They worshipped *and* they doubted. So don’t feel bad about yourself if you have that same mixture. Because as one preacher puts it, “whatchamacallit will freeze over before we have total faith without any question at all.” If you can’t worship Christ without a doubt, then be bold to worship Him in spite of your doubts.

II

Jesus remains undeterred by our doubt. He goes right ahead and gives us his charge all the same. The risen Christ puts all his cards on the table. He lays out his blueprint for building the future. We call this brief encounter, the “Great Commission.” I like to think of it as Jesus’ “famous last words.” Ready, set, go! **“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”** Sadly, Jesus’ followers have all too often misread the first part of this blueprint. Believe it or not, some people read the word “make” literally, as though Jesus is commanding us to coerce people into becoming disciples. There have been times and places when and where people have been emotionally coerced, socially coerced, even militantly coerced into following Jesus. Yet, Jesus himself always gave people room to say no, because if you don’t have room to say no, your yes doesn’t mean a thing. Making disciples is done without any kind of pressuring; it is done by giving people room. When Jesus commissions his followers to “make disciples” he means simply “disciple everybody.” Think of disciple as a verb. **“Go out and (disciple) everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life.”** says Jesus. How are we to disciple people? The same way Jesus did. He welcomed them, he loved them, he blessed them, he helped them and some of them did not care. But the good news is that those who do care are saved from self-centered despair and learn to live abundant lives of joyful service.

III

Then Jesus says, “I want you to teach them. **Instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.**” In other words, Christ’s blueprint for our church is for us to be a life-training center where we learn how to live as “God followers.” Some people are not much into that, notes preacher Fred Craddock. They are sort of into having a quick emotional response or some kind of fuzzy experience of God, and that’s the end of it. Well, if you were to die that same day, you would be in great shape, (suggests Craddock) because God’s grace can save you in no time. But most of us live a long time after our baptism and confirmation and the question is, **How are we to live?** What are we to do? It’s not enough to have opinions. We need to have some instruction. What did

Jesus say? I can read the editorials to know what the pundits say, I can listen to the radio and hear what the President says, I can ask you to tell me what you have to say, but somehow all of that is not enough. I still want to know what Jesus says. The Justice Department may say that torturing prisoners is permissible behavior but I want to know what Jesus says. Military officials may say that pre-emptive war is justifiable strategy but I want to know what Jesus says. Pro-life and pro-choice groups, gay bashers and lesbian supporters may say they have all the answers about human sexuality, but I want to know what Jesus says. We all have our own ideas about issues like suicide, euthanasia, and capital punishment but we want to hear from God about these things. That's why Jesus tells his disciples: "I want you to teach them everything I have commanded you".

IV

Don't get me wrong. It's not that we can turn to the Bible like a divine encyclopedia and simply look up what Jesus has to say on a particular issue. Because the truth is, Jesus does not specifically address many of the questions I have on my mind. But when I am instructed in the stories Jesus told; when I learn about the sermon on the mount; when I have been taught what Jesus says to the woman caught in adultery, to the rich young man who loves his wealth, to the blind man who pleads for healing; all of this helps me hear what Jesus has to say about the problems we face today. That is why Jesus says, "*I want you to instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you—just teach them. You can't make them do it, but they want to know.*" We want to hear from God. Jesus says "teach them to practice all I have commanded you." Basically that means he wants us to practice love. Like a spiritual gymnasium, we gather as a congregation to practice Christ's command to "love one another as He has loved us." We come to practice loving God "with all our heart and soul and mind and strength." To practice loving our neighbor as ourselves. What's more, Christ's commands us to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute you and if you don't think that takes practice then you have never tried it. Discipleship means learning to practice what Jesus preached.

V

Spread love everywhere you go; (said Mother Theresa)

First of all in your own house.

Give love to your children, to
your wife or husband, to a next
door neighbor...Let no one ever
come to you without leaving
better and happier. Be the living
expression of God's kindness;
in your smile, kindness in your
warm greeting.

In other words, to practice love.

Conclusion

Over the next six Sundays we will be building on this blueprint of the Great Commission. You are encouraged to make a special effort to come and worship Christ, doubts and all. The sermons will focus on Christ's teaching about salvation, fellowship, worship, truth, justice and faithfulness. In other words, what Presbyterians traditionally refer to as "the great ends of the church." Then, around tables during coffee hour each week, we will hear from one another about how we try to put these great purposes into practice in our own lives. Because, the point is it takes disciples to make disciples. And, after all, that's why were here. An why the risen Christ promises to be here with us "**day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.**"