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Sermon June 2, 2019

When I preached on this text back in January, I focused on Matthew 28:16-20, collectively grouped as the story of the Great Commission. But as I was preparing this sermon, I went back to the very beginning of chapter 28, to the first encounter with the risen Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. There are guards keeping watch over the tomb of Jesus when some women arrive to pay their respects. You're probably familiar with this part: an angel comes to the women at the tomb and surprises them with news that Jesus is alive! The guards were paralyzed with fear when the angel arrived. There is a reason that angels usually preface whatever they are going to say with the statement, "Do not be afraid!" Angels are terrifying! But the women listen to the angel and head out to tell the disciples what they saw. On their way out of the garden, they run into Jesus, himself! Jesus also tells the women to share what they have seen and to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. That is where our story picks up today, Matthew 28, verses 11-20:

11 Now as the women were on their way, some of the guards came into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 They met with the elders and decided to give a large sum of money to the soldiers. 13 They told them, "Say that Jesus' disciples came at night and stole his body while you were sleeping. 14 And if the governor hears about this, we will take care of it with him so you will have nothing to worry about." 15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were told. And this report has spread throughout all Judea to this very day.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. 18 Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. 19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

And with that, chapter 28 ends. That is a lot of action packed into one chapter! A scary angel, two encounters with Jesus, some sketchy bribery, and a pretty hefty job left to some guys who aren’t all sure that what they are experiencing is legit.

Let’s go back to verse 17: “When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.”

According to one of my professors at Columbia, Stan Saunders, the Greek could be translated to mean that some disciples worshiped and some doubted... but it is more likely that all the disciples both worshiped and doubted. The two are not mutually exclusive. Even though they doubted, they still showed up.

As we read verses 16-20, Craig R. Koester, a New Testament professor at Luther Seminary emphasizes that “The disciples who go to the mountain have not seen any of the Easter drama. They have not seen an earthquake or the angel descending. They have not seen the risen Jesus or heard his voice. Their reputations are soon to be tarnished by rumors that they have perpetrated a hoax to get others to believe that Jesus is alive... Among these disciples there is both worship

and uncertainty, both devotion and hesitancy. One might expect something clearer and unequivocal. They are in the presence of the living Christ, after all. But this mixture of faith and doubt also characterizes discipleship.” Let me say that again: “this mixture of faith and doubt also characterizes discipleship.”

Being a disciple of Christ does not mean that you have to have it all together. No matter how many times we encounter the risen Christ in scripture, there is usually a degree of doubt left over.

I know that when I was a child, the events in the bible didn't completely make sense to me. But I was told that they were true and left to make sense of them on my own. I remember going to a creationist theme park in my town with a friend from church and learning about how Adam and Eve walked with the dinosaurs. I was reminded of the first two chapters of Genesis and how God created the heavens and the earth in only seven days. Now, I may have grown up in church, but I was still a pretty smart elementary schooler and I just couldn't reconcile the book of Genesis with the science I was learning in school. That is my first real memory of doubting my Christian faith. I looked at the stories I had been taught and wondered, “how is this possible?” I tried to work it out in my head and make science and Genesis match up. So I asked my pastor, “do you think that God created in seven days? Or do you think that God's days are actually millions of years for us and that is how He did it?” My pastor gave me a non-committal answer and encouraged me to believe the stories of our faith. He told me that anything is possible with God.

Now, I'm not saying that isn't true, but it wasn't a good enough answer for me. My little brain had to UNDERSTAND how the bible could possibly be true. It was starting to feel a little like fiction. I continued searching for answers in middle school. As I went to my Southern Baptist grandparents' house for a few weeks every summer and learned about more and more crazy stories in the Bible, I felt like a fraud. How could I be a Christian and be so unsure that the Bible was true? By high school, I was using my allowance money to buy books on Christian apologetics. I was the President of my school's Christian club for three years and I could not afford to be uninformed when my peers had questions in doubt. As a leader, I believed that I had to have all the answers. Doubt was not an option. So I read nearly every one of Lee Strobel's books: The Case for Faith, The Case for Christ, The Case for a Creator... that satisfied me for a little while. But the doubt was still underneath... lingering like a hungry animal waiting to pounce.

And pounce it did. But not until seminary. I was sure that seminary would be the place to relieve me of all my doubts, but I was sorely mistaken. Instead, seminary took my doubts out of hiding and made me interrogate them. I wondered, what if this faith that I am dedicating my life and career to is all a sham? I am not alone in this feeling. I don't know if this is particularly encouraging, but I can tell you that faith leaders have doubts, too. There is a reason we live by faith - because the things we believe are pretty unbelievable. No wonder the disciples doubt! Jesus keeps popping up in all these unexpected places: on a mountaintop, in a locked room, on a lonely road... and Jesus, their beloved leader, was last seen dead in the tomb. So this living man

who appears is mistaken for a gardener, a fellow traveler, a stranger, a hallucination. It is hard to believe in the resurrection.

But it is the resurrection, the fulfillment of God's promises, that gives us hope. So Jesus shows the disciples that even in their doubt, he is there. He is really there. He is alive after being tortured, humiliated, and crucified. Jesus - their teacher and their friend, for whom they grieved - is *alive*. But even his presence isn't enough to completely banish their doubts. And that is okay. Because Jesus is still there with them. Even in their doubt, they still showed up. And even in their doubt, there is work to do! Jesus doesn't wait for them to believe - a doubtless mind is not a prerequisite for discipleship. In their doubting discipleship, they are called to go make more disciples! Not to convince new believers with the perfection of their own faith... but to show up authentically in doubt and meet people where they are.

A favorite author and speaker of mine who recently died, Rachel Held Evans, won me over completely with her book *Searching for Sunday*. She writes about her own experiences of doubt and heartbreak and finding God in the messy brokenness. The prologue explains that she didn't want to write *Searching for Sunday* because her faith journey is not yet complete. How many of us are perfectionists, not wanting to do something until we can do it ~just right~? Rachel writes, "I am angry and petulant, hopeful and naive. I am trying to make my own way, but I haven't yet figured out how to do that... Church books are written by people with a plan and ten steps, not by Christians just hanging on by their fingernails... I am writing because sometimes we are closer to the truth in our vulnerability than in our safe certainties and because in spite of all my doubt and insecurity, in spite of my abiding impulse to sleep in on Sunday mornings, I have seen

the first few ribbons of dawn's light seep through my bedroom window, and there is a dim, hopeful glow kissing the horizon. Even when I don't believe in church, I believe in the resurrection. I believe in the hope of Sunday morning."

What would it look like if church was a place where vulnerability was welcome and doubt was understood as a part of discipleship? As Rachel puts it, "we long for our churches to be safe places to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable... we want to bring our whole selves through the church doors, without leaving our hearts and minds behind, without wearing a mask." My childhood self would have loved this kind of church. The kind of church where questions are embraced and doubt is not shameful. Jesus wouldn't want us to wear a mask. Jesus didn't ask the disciples to banish their doubts or to pretend that they were certain in their faith. Jesus was just present with them.

Rachel finishes up the prologue of *Searching for Sunday* by saying that she is searching for Sunday resurrection and therefore her book is about "all the strange ways God brings dead things back to life again." She writes, "[This book] is about why, even on days when I suspect all this talk of Jesus and resurrection and life everlasting is a bunch of bunk designed to coddle us through an essentially meaningless existence, I should still like to be buried with my feet facing the rising sun. Just in case."

She beautifully explains that resurrection hope is all blended up with our fear and doubt. So post-resurrection Jesus doesn't expect his disciples to understand everything or even to believe

all that has happened. And I don't think that God expects us to believe all that we are told without any wondering, questioning, and doubt. Still, Jesus beckons the reluctant disciples forth into a life of gospel proclamation. And that same invitation is extended to us. We don't have to have everything figured out or put together to follow Christ and live into the Great Commission. Because of God's grace, we can show up as we are - broken and doubting and filled with more questions than answers. Even in our doubt or fear or questioning, we are invited into the unknown to participate in God's mission on Earth. That is what discipleship looks like. And that is our charge: to go out into the world authentically, showing up in the midst of doubt, fear, and uncertainty, to follow Jesus - knowing that we are not alone.