

Doubt, and Dusty Sandals

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Matthew 28:16–20: The Great Commission

When you're on a preaching schedule, the first thing you do after getting your date is run to the lectionary and cross your fingers. Not because some Scripture matters more than others—but because some texts make you quietly whisper, “Lord... help.”

I had a seminary professor who was also a rancher. He had a bull named Big Mac, and he'd come to class in a T-shirt, jeans, and work boots, and he was also a world-renowned Old Testament scholar—a legend in the field.

When he would walk us through a particularly difficult passage, he would, with a twinkle in his eye and a thick Alabama accent, say, “Well... preach on that.”

The good news is that today's Gospel is not one of those texts.

Well, not at first read.

When I told my friends in ministry I was preaching on Matthew 28, the Great Commission, I was met with what I can only describe as preacher jealousy. “Oh, Kate, Jesus is so clear in that text. Your heart will be so inspired that the sermon will literally write itself.”

Because after all, the Great Commission is both the greatest recap and the greatest P.S. of all time.

The recap: Jesus is crucified and buried. The tomb is sealed and guarded. Women discover the empty tomb. Jesus appears alive. The disciples run to Galilee to meet at the mountain, the rendezvous point.

The PS:

You - go Make disciples. Baptize. Teach.

Not a parable. Not a metaphor. A command.

Go and do. Go and teach. Go and disciple.

We have a lectern Bible in our house. Each week we open it to the Gospel and try to read it each time we pass. And I've read this passage, and I've prayed this passage, over and over again, and God's revelation in the text has been quiet. Very quiet.

Until—tucked right in the middle of the passage, verse 17 jumped out, landed right in the middle of my heart, pitched a tent, and settled in.

17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

Ah. Yes. There I am.

The “some doubted” part.

The Greek word used here for doubt (*distazō* (διστάζω)) is about wavering, being divided within oneself, and not the absence of faith.

Because of how I think, I encounter most stories visually, so immediately, I wondered what those doubting disciples looked like.

When Jesus arrived on the hill, were they kicking rocks in the dust like nervous kids do? Were they glancing sideways at one another, whispering,

“We saw him get arrested. The women told us he resurrected. He is here—on the mountain, the place he said he’d be, but...

Is he the real deal?

Is he really talking to us—to go and tell the story?

And what is the story, exactly?

What if he knows we doubt? Would we be in trouble?

What if we’re not fit for this job? How can we proclaim something we don’t fully understand and we don’t always fully believe?”

This kind of questioning and doubting faith is familiar to me.

When I was a kid, I asked a lot of questions. Many of them without answers.

My family was not surprised I ended up going to seminary; in fact, I think they prayed for it.

As a kid, the words of the poet Shel Silverstein—many of you know his work—offered a place for me to sort out my “sort-outs,” and I loved his words and illustrations. You might remember the poem from *A Light in the Attic* called “Whatifs” (Silverstein, 23).

I will read a small portion here.

“Last night while I was lying there, some Whatifs crawled inside my ear, and danced and partied all night long and sang their good ol’ Whatif song.

What if I get beat up? What if there’s poison in my cup?

What if I fail? What if I fall? What if I never learn at all?

Everything seems swell and then... the nighttime Whatifs start again.”¹

I know Shel Silverstein wasn't asking about the divinity of Jesus, but I came to believe that honestly believing in something requires spending some time with the “what if” song.

And that's what those disciples were doing.

What if I always doubt?

What if my fear never runs out?

But then, the text goes on to say,

Jesus came toward them and said,

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.”

Jesus came to them, to those exact people.

Leaning in to speak.

A direct glance.

A physical step.

A step toward.

He was not repelled by doubt.

He was not allergic to human fragility.

He came close.

He stepped into that doubt.

He occupied that space.

Because Jesus was speaking exactly to those doubting people.

Jesus was speaking to the people with the courage to show up.

¹ Shel Silverstein, "Whatifs," *A Light in the Attic* (New York: Random House, 1981), p.23

The last line of that passage from today's reading is,
And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.
And the cycle starts again.

"But Jesus, what if I don't know how to tell the story?"

And surely I am with you to the very end of the age.

"What if I stumble my way through faith?"

And surely I am with you to the very end of the age.

"What if I don't tell the story correctly? What if I lead people astray?"

And surely I am with you to the very end of the age.

Not when you figure it out.

Not when your doubt disappears.

Not when your faith becomes polished and perfect.

Here now. As you are. In your doubt.

And as people who show up.

And just like that—Jesus entrusts the greatest story of all time to a group of rock-kicking, side-glancing, question-asking, worshiping-and-doubting disciples.

That's a story I will tell. That's a story I will travel to share. That's a story I will shout.
That's a story I will sing.

That is the Great Commission.

Grace Church, I guess I'll see you on the road.

Thanks be to God.