

June 4th, 2023

Matthew 28:16-20 “Okay, Go!”

Seems like I’ve been sharing a lot of preacher secrets with you lately. I do this because individually and as a collectively I consider you to be a particularly smart and savvy community of faith. Plus, our movement came into being because our founders didn’t believe in checking your brain at the door before you walk into church. Those founders established quite a few colleges and seminaries that are still going strong today. We welcome people as they are and we’re not afraid of questions. Our job is to equip people to use their God-given intellect to draw closer to God and help others develop a healthy spiritual practice. So I don’t mind letting you in on a few “preacher secrets” now and then because secrets often involve people in power hiding things in darkness from the general population so they can exercise and maintain control. But Jesus said that he is the light of the world, and so are those who follow him. Light shines in the dark places to reveal truth, even when truth is difficult to hear. I believe it’s my job as a pastor of this fine congregation to make sure that you are equipped to share in the ministry of shining Christ’s light into the world which is why I let you all in on these preacher secrets. So here’s preacher secret #313 – “To keep people from asking difficult questions, use big theological words so they’ll feel silly for asking in the first place.”

That’s not the case here at First Christian Church, Chico. Truth be told, we preachers can’t help using big theological words. We went to school for a *long* time to learn these words. They are burned into our psyche. But I’m not stingy. I want you to know, and I’m willing to share. So, today I’m going to teach you one of those words, and who knows, aside from helping you grow in your faith, it might even be useful if you’re working a crossword puzzle or find yourself as a contestant on Jeopardy someday. The word for the day is, “theophany.” Any time you run into a word with “theo” like “theology” that means “God” and any time you run into a word with “phany” like “epiphany” that means “to reveal.” So “theophany” means to reveal God, and can even be translated as, “*where*

God is revealed to us.” In the Bible, what location seems to be the main place where God is most often revealed to human beings? On a mountain! Moses received the 10 commandments on Mount Sinai. In Mark and Luke’s gospel, Jesus appoints his disciples on a mountain. Jesus’ most famous sermon is the sermon on the ... mount! The Jerusalem temple is located on the south side of Mount Zion. Jesus’ transfiguration was on Mount Tabor. And in today’s scripture, Jesus and his disciples are on a mountain in Galilee when he commissions them to go into all the world to make other disciples.

Great things happen in high places. That’s why so many church camps are located on or among mountains. Mountains are ripe with opportunities for theophanies ... where God is revealed to campers and counselors alike. Community of the Great Commission, our Disciples camp here in Northern California is on Michigan Bluff, elevation 4,000 feet. The Disciples camp that I managed in Virginia was on Pott’s Mountain, elevation 3,720 feet. Loch Leven, the Disciples camp in Southern California is up the road from a town called Mountain Home (3,600). People deliberately seek out mountains to get away from the noise and clutter of cities so they can experience divine moments and receive clarity. Many ministers received their call in places like these.

On this unnamed mountain in Galilee, after Jesus ended his earthly ministry, after his death and resurrection, but still before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, Jesus told his disciples to gather so he could give them one last mission before his ascension. It’s a familiar story for some, but I want to spend some time on verse 7 this morning. When the disciples saw Jesus on the mountain, Matthew writes, “they worshipped him, but some doubted.” In our pew bibles, the editors dubbed this section, “The Commissioning of the Disciples.” Most Bibles label it “The Great Commission.” So most of the time when we study this passage, we concentrate on the commission itself ... and we will get around to that ... but verse seven kind of gets swept under the rug so we can get to the “good stuff.” We want to hear about Jesus promising that he will always be with the disciples. But let’s not gloss

over verse seven, because if we're looking for a theophany this morning, we need to understand why this verse is important.

Doubt is often seen as a taboo word in some churches. I guess I should back up and say, "Doubt is a word you can say in church so long as you make it clear that it's a bad thing." Maybe this is preacher secret #314 – "Always make sure you tell your parishioners that doubt is a bad thing." Making "doubt" a taboo word will prevent people from asking tough questions. Here's preacher secret #315, and this is potentially the one that can get me in the most trouble for sharing, so I don't know, maybe we should hit pause on our recording. Preacher secret #315 is, "Never let your parishioners know that *you* experience doubt, otherwise then they'll think it's okay." Well guess what, folks? I experience doubt. And I guarantee that just about every other preacher you know or have ever heard of experiences doubt too. It wouldn't be in the manual of preacher secrets if it weren't true! "Oh, come on ... what do you doubt Pastor Jesse?" Sometimes I doubt that God is a God of abundance. Sometimes I doubt that God cares for people that I don't particularly like. Sometimes I doubt that God is present in my life when things seem to be falling apart. Sometimes I doubt my call to ministry and wonder if I even have enough skills, gifts or motivation to answer that call. Sometimes I doubt that God can use me and work through me because I have these doubts. Yet here I am every Sunday, Bible open and ready to proclaim the word. "Yeah, we don't need to hear this preacher, just go on Sabbatical next month and come back when you've got all your ... stuff straightened out, okay?"

And yet here in one of the most important passages in the gospel story, it says that some of the disciples were doubting. But if that was the case, wouldn't Jesus say something like, "Okay, you four (I'm just guessing the number here)? You doubters? I'm about ready to give the rest of these guys their marching orders. You go get your stuff straightened out first and then you can join the rest of the disciples. Sheesh. What's wrong with you all anyway? You'd think that after three years of walking all over Judea with me, watching me heal the sick and hearing

me preach the gospel, bearing witness to my crucifixion, discovering the empty tomb, and seeing me after I was resurrected, you'd show me a little more faith here. Dingbats."

But no, that's not at all what Jesus said or even would say. In fact, the only thing Jesus said was, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." He did not follow up with, "Except if you're a doubter. If you're a doubter, go back home and let the varsity team play. You had your chance, and you blew it." No, Jesus commissioned *all* of them. Even the ones who doubted.

Here's another thing to consider – Verse seven says, "When they saw him, they worshipped him, but *some* doubted." What this says is that even the ones who doubted worshipped! Well, how can that be? How can someone worship and doubt at the same time? How can those two things co-mingle at all? Listen, it happens all the time, right? This is just where some folks live. Not all, mind you, but some. Just like it was with the disciples on the day of the great commission. Some doubted. But they still worshipped. I think we need to get rid of this notion that there is no room for doubt in the church.

So what *does* it mean to worship in the midst of doubt? What is the good news for those who have doubts? Some people have doubts about the goodness of God or the goodness of creation, especially when there's a story about a mass shooting every week. Here's the good news – as humans, we doubt. But God and Christ never have doubts about us. Jesus commissioned *all* of the disciples *knowing* that some doubted. He gives them *all* the commission, "Go and make disciples." Not with perfect understanding. Not with perfect faith, but with love. He said, "Teach them all that I commanded you." Well, what did Jesus command us to do? In John 15 Jesus said, "This is my commandment that you ... love one another." In Mark 12:31, Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as

yourself.” In Matthew and Luke’s gospel, he commands his disciples to “feed my sheep.” He doesn’t say to “teach them correct doctrine” or “teach them orthodoxy.” He said, “Teach them what I command you,” and what he commands us to do is share bread, feed the multitude, heal the sick, sit with those who need companionship. Now we can talk about the “good stuff.” Then Jesus reminds the disciples that while they are doing this, “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” The takeaway lesson for the Great Commission is that God’s power and God’s presence go hand in hand and Jesus is with us even in the midst of our doubts.

This is a powerful message because sometimes it’s my doubt that holds me back when it comes to my spiritual growth. I think, “Well, I can’t do this particular ministry because I haven’t got it all figured out yet. I have to be sure. When I have it all figured it out ... when I have all the particulars, when I have all the rationale, all the orthodoxy, all the right arguments, all the missing pieces, all the things I need for a script so I know what I’m going to say, *then* I can go out there and fulfill this great commission. But in commissioning all of the disciples, even the ones who doubted, Jesus is acknowledging that they don’t have all of the answers. Don’t let that hold you back from sharing the good news.

We may not have all the answers, but we can share what the love of God in Christ means to us and how the way of Christ transforms us. Making disciples is equipping people to be students of that way just as Christ equipped his disciples. The Holy Spirit provides the tools we need to succeed. And here’s the best thing. The disciples not only had the Holy Spirit, they had each other too. And as it was in that time and place, it is so now – When we are experiencing doubt – when we are feeling helpless or hopeless, we can borrow hope from other disciples, and it may be that others will borrow hope from you too. Believe me when I say this, because Jesus is about ready to say, “Okay ... *go!*”