

## THEY WORSHIPED AND THEY DOUBTED

Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 28:16-20

It is a magnificent scene, this final event in the gospel of Matthew. The disciples have gathered on the mountain in Galilee, and there they behold Jesus for one final time. This is the risen Christ, the triumphant Christ, the Christ who will give them their marching orders: “Go and make disciples of all nations.”

But there is something bothersome about the scene, like the hum of a mosquito in your ear that keeps the picnic from being perfect. What was it? “The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted.”

There it is—“but some doubted.” What is that doing here? This should be the moment of all moments when doubt is banished. The risen Lord is right there. “All authority on heaven and earth are given to me . . . I am with you always.” And yet, even here, even at the climax of the gospel of Matthew, this little word is here: “some doubted.”

It is not as unexpected as we might think to find doubt here. In fact, all four of the gospels tell of people who have doubts or misgivings about the resurrection of Jesus. In Mark’s gospel, the women at the tomb can’t process the message of the young man at the tomb who tells them Jesus is raised, and they flee in terror. In Luke, the women return to tell the disciples of the resurrection, but they don’t believe it and think it is an idle tale. And of course, John’s gospel has the patron saint of all doubters, the disciples Thomas: “Unless I put my finger into the print of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” So it is not totally unexpected that Matthew’s gospel would include the detail that even here, even standing before the risen Christ, there are those who doubt.

What Matthew actually wrote may actually be stronger than that. The Greek original doesn't have the word "some." There is considerable debate over how this little phrase should be translated, but it may be that it says: "They worshiped and they doubted." What we may have here is not worshipers over here and doubters over there, but both groups all mixed up together, or even people who are worshiping and doubting at the same time.

Our men's Bible study group has been studying Mark Allen Powell's book *Loving Jesus*. In that book, Powell discusses this verse. Powell is a Bible professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Ohio, and he said that one time he asked a Bible translator about this verse and why the phrase has been translated "but some doubted." The translator said, "The verse wouldn't make sense otherwise. No one can worship and doubt at the same time." Powell said he invited the man to visit a Lutheran church. They do it all the time.<sup>1</sup>

We do it in the Presbyterian church, too. We worship and we doubt. We have great confidence in the power and presence of Jesus, but we also have our questions. We praise and we ponder; we celebrate and we challenge; we worship and we doubt.

Not long ago I was in a worship service and heard the preacher say: "You've got to believe in Jesus in order to be saved. And you've got to believe without any doubt whatsoever. If you do that, believe with no doubt, then Jesus will say to you, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' But if you have any doubts about his Lordship, he will say, 'Depart from me, I do not know you.'"

Wow!—no doubts. I've got to believe perfectly and purely, and if I allow even the slightest question to sneak into my thoughts, well, off you go. If I have any doubts, you can bet I won't mention them to that preacher. He's made his position clear—no doubts will be tolerated. Whatever doubts I have must be kept to myself, along with a fair amount of guilt at having such doubts in the first place.

And yet, to be human is to have times of doubt. We worship and we doubt. We believe and we wonder. And why not? There's a lot in our world that assaults our faith. A hundred thousand people in Myanmar die from a cyclone, and before the dust settles a similar number are killed in an earthquake in China. Lord, if you have risen from the dead, why do such things still happen? The disease strikes, the accident claims a life. Risen Christ, where are you?

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Allen Powell, *Loving Jesus*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 121.

The great reformer John Calvin puts it well. We get the picture of these great church leaders as having faith that is absolutely certain and strong. But listen to Calvin, writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: “I cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.”<sup>2</sup>

We worship and we doubt. We truly do worship. We are here because we believe. When we stand and say: “I believe in God the Father almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,” we aren’t blowing smoke. We truly affirm it. We believe it. Jesus Christ is Lord. That is who we are.

But we are also human, and we know how shaky our faith can be at times. If it’s up to us to keep our faith pure and strong, then we’re in trouble.

But it’s not up to us. It’s up to Jesus. And Jesus is Lord. Our confidence is not in the strength of our faith, because we know how uncertain that can be at times. Our faith is based on the faith of Christ. It is Jesus who does the heavy believing for us, Jesus who prays for us, Jesus who gives us the assurance of salvation based, not on our purity, but on his love.

“They worshiped and they doubted.” Jesus did not say, “OK you believers get over here, and you doubters over there.” He didn’t commission the believers and banish the doubters. He gave the great commission to all who were there, worshipers and doubters alike. “He gave the Commission to a *community* of disciples in which worship and doubt were allowed to coincide.”<sup>3</sup>

Our hope is not in ourselves and in the purity of our faith. Our hope is in Jesus. The Great Commission is a command: “Go and make disciples of all nations . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them.” But that command is framed by two great affirmations. It’s like a sandwich: The command is in the middle, and on the top and the bottom are two great words of assurance.

The first is this: “All authority in heaven and earth is given to me.” All authority. In heaven and on earth. Jesus is Lord, not just here, but in every time and place. Jesus is Lord where children cry for their parents in Myanmar, and where mothers dig their dead

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. III, ii, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Powell, p. 122.

children from the rubble in China. Jesus is Lord at the hospital where those awaiting surgery awaken in the middle of the night sweating with fear. Jesus is Lord at the jail where an inmate ponders the mess he has made of his life.

And more than that, Jesus has all authority on the days when our faith is strong, and also on the days when we wonder if anything makes sense. Jesus has authority over all things on the days when our lives are on cruise control, and also on the days when we've got four flat tires. Jesus has all authority when we worship and also when we doubt. That's the first thing.

The other piece of bread in this sandwich is the final words in the gospel of Matthew. "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age." I am with you. Always. There is no place where Christ is absent. On the sunny days, and also in the darkness of despair, "lo, I am with you."

Terry Hendrickson and I took communion to the nursing home this week. There in that place, where the power of death is so strong, we spoke again the familiar words: "This is my body for you . . . This is my blood of the covenant poured out for many." Jesus is there in the nursing home, the place of pain, the place of grief. Jesus is with us even in times of doubt.

"All authority has been given to me . . . I am with you always." When we consider the monumental assurance of Jesus, our doubts begin to look, well, pretty puny. Fretting over our doubts is to put the emphasis in the wrong place. It makes a bigger deal of our doubts than Jesus does. Jesus doesn't care. Worshipers and doubters, I can use all of you, he says.

There are surely times in our lives when doubt will come. But don't get hung up on it. Jesus is Lord. Just do what he says: "Make disciples . . . baptize . . . teach." And let God take care of the rest.✠