

Ephesians 3:1-13

Matthew 28:16-20

May 7, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GO AS THE ONES JESUS SENDS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“It’s go time!”

That was the title and theme of Mrs. Janice Wynn’s baccalaureate sermon at Wallace Rose Hill High School a few years ago.

Mrs. Wynn told the Class of 2014, “It’s go time! It’s go time to put into practice what you have learned in your thirteen years of school — whether you’re going on to college, to serve in the military, or to enter the workforce. It’s go time to remember who taught you what you know and helped you get where you are today. It’s go time to do new things, but don’t forget that all us are here for you, always.”

“It’s go time!”

That is the theme of Jesus’ Great Commission to his disciples on the mountaintop in Galilee.

“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.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

“It’s go time! Go, and put into practice what you have learned from me. Make disciples of all the people. Show them what it means to live as my followers. Baptize them in the mighty name of God and welcome them to a new life. Teach them everything you’ve learned from me. And don’t forget — I am **always** with you.”

In a few minutes, I will stand at the bottom of the steps and pronounce a charge and benediction:

Go forward, people of God,
in the power of Christ’s presence,
to fulfill the purpose
for which God has called you and sent you!

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with all of you. Amen.

After we worship the risen Christ, it’s Go Time! Time to go and make disciples of all nations. Time to go and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Time to go and teach them to obey everything that Jesus has com-

manded us. Time to go and remember that our risen Lord Jesus Christ is always with us. Time to go as the ones Jesus sends. But . . .

Anne Brontë, the youngest member of the famed Brontë literary family, wrote, “There is always a ‘but’ in this imperfect world.” That little three-letter word is even shorter in biblical Greek — just two letters (*de*), yet it’s the fourth most frequently used word in the New Testament. Grammatically it’s called an “adversative particle.” The little word (usually the second word in the following phrase) is used to connect one clause with the preceding clause in order to show some contrast. One source says “the contrast is often scarcely discernible.”¹

That hardly seems to be the case in Matthew’s story of the Great Commission. It’s as if the final edit missed a most embarrassing detail in Matthew’s manuscript. In the midst of the soaring rhetoric of Jesus’ commissioning speech to his graduating class of disciples there on the mountain in Galilee, that pesky, troublesome, even scandalous little two-letter word shows up in verse 17 — “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

Let’s be honest for a minute. If you were telling the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, and you got to the final crescendo, the great climax of the story, the mountaintop scene that will carry the story forward, would you have included that phrase “but some doubted”? Wouldn’t the story be so much stronger, so much better, so much less embarrassing if it simply said, “When they saw him, they worshiped him,” and then Jesus said, “It’s Go Time!”?

But there it is — “but some doubted.” What are we to do with that? Well, maybe the first thing we can do is admit that it’s a startlingly honest admission — “they worshiped him, but some doubted.” Maybe that’s exactly where you find yourself this morning — “Here I am to worship, Here I am to bow down, Here I am to say that you’re my God” — **but . . .**

“Doubt” has a negative connotation. The dictionary defines doubt as “to call into question the truth of something; to be uncertain of or in doubt about; to lack confidence in; to consider unlikely.”

“They worshiped him, but some doubted.” Why did the eleven disciples doubt? Or, to be more exact, what did the eleven disciples doubt? Since Matthew doesn’t tell us, any answer we come up with is pure speculation, but . . .

Could it be some of them doubted that it was really Jesus?

Could it be some of them doubted he was really alive?

Could it be some of them lacked confidence in themselves there on the mountain?

Could it be some of them considered it unlikely that Jesus would have anything to do with them since they had abandoned him in his time of need?

Could it be some doubted because seeing Jesus alive again rocked their world?

Could it be some doubted because it seemed too good to be true?

It’s easy to think of doubt as the opposite of faith. But notice that Matthew doesn’t say anything about some of the disciples not believing in Jesus. Matthew says, “They worshiped him, but some doubted.” The writer, Anne Lamott, comments that “the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely.

Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”

In his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, writer Frederick Buechner also talks about “doubt.” He writes, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving. There are two principal kinds of doubt, one of the head and the other of the stomach.

“In my head there is almost nothing I can't doubt when the fit is upon me — the divinity of Christ, the efficacy of the sacraments, the significance of the church, the existence of God. But even when I am at my most skeptical, I go on with my life as though nothing untoward has happened.

“I have never experienced stomach doubt, but I think Jesus did. When he cried out, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!’ I don't think he was raising a theological issue any more than he was quoting Psalm 22. I think he had looked into the abyss itself and found there a darkness that spiritually, viscerally, totally engulfed him. I think God allows that kind of darkness to happen only to God's saints. The rest of us aren't up to doubting that way — or maybe believing that way either. When our faith is strongest, we believe with our hearts as well as with our heads, but only at a few rare moments, I think, do we feel in our stomachs what it must be like to be engulfed by light.”²

When I planned my preaching for the Sundays of the Easter season, from April 30 - June 11, I picked three stories from Luke, Matthew, and John. On Easter Sunday, we heard Mark's story about the first Easter, when the women found the tomb empty, but didn't tell anyone anything, because they were so afraid. It didn't really dawn on me until I was working on this sermon that in the three stories from Luke, Matthew, and John, some of the disciples have doubts. Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus sadly say, “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” (Luke 24:21) On the mountain in Galilee, they worshiped him, but some doubted. (Matthew 28:17) The disciples told Thomas, “We have seen the Lord,” but he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25)

Does that mean these disciples believed in Jesus any longer? That doesn't seem to be what's going on. Instead, they seem to be struggling with the new reality of life in the risen Lord. Maybe it's a combination of all sorts of things — wonder, amazement, fear, uncertainty, their world being turned upside down, questions about their future.

In September 1982, the beginning of our final year in seminary, I sat in the office of Dr. Bill Arnold at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. Bill was one of our pastoral care professors, but I wasn't there to talk with him about class assignments. I was there to talk with him about whether or not I wanted to finish my seminary training and be a minister in the church. August 1981 - August 1982 had been an incredibly stressful year. My father died in May 1982, and that rocked my world. It was unexpected, and his death seemed to contradict all of the messages I was getting from so many people — “We're praying for him. Everything's going to work out great. He'll be

fine.” Also, Nancy and I had gone through a very trying internship at a church where the senior pastor was asked to leave under very bad circumstances. Not only were Nancy and I left to serve as pastors of an 800 member congregation for three months, some people wanted to drag us into the minister’s problems and blame us somehow for his being asked to leave. It was a tough time.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to keep going with this ministry thing. I hadn’t quit believing in Jesus or anything like that, but I had some serious doubts and questions about life and ministry and what God was calling me to do. I remember getting up on Sunday mornings and going to church with Nancy, where I worshiped, but doubted at the same time.

I’m glad Matthew didn’t sanitize his final story by editing out that phrase “but some doubted.” In fact, maybe Matthew intentionally put that in his story, because it so honestly describes where we will undoubtedly find ourselves at some point(s) in our faith journey.

I take great comfort and hope in two things from this last story in Matthew’s gospel:

1) The Greek grammar of “but some doubted” could allow for it to be translated “they (meaning “all of them” doubted,” but that little word **de** separates out some of the disciples from the rest. However, we can be grateful that Jesus doesn’t separate the disciples by saying something like, “Those of you who worshiped me without doubting, go and make disciples and baptize and teach; the rest of you, get out of my sight!” No, Jesus came and said to **them** (all of them), “It’s Go Time!”

And 2) “but some doubted” is not the last word in Matthew’s story and gospel. That place of honor belongs to this wonderful promise, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Way back at the beginning of his gospel, Matthew tells us, “they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:23) Matthew wraps his story with the promise that God is with us always in the person of Jesus our risen Lord.

In a few minutes, we will sing about going out as the ones Jesus sends, with all of our faith and our doubts and our questions and our hopes and our fears, with the promise of Jesus always with us to sustain us and carry us.

*Go to the world! Go struggle, bless, and pray;
the nights of tears give way to joyous day.
As servant church, you follow Christ’s own way.
Alleluia. Alleluia.*

*Go to the world! Go as the ones I send,
for I am with you till the age shall end,
when all the hosts of glory cry “Amen!”
Alleluia. Alleluia.*

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, just as you did so long ago with your disciples in Galilee, commission us again to worship you, to experience your love, to sense your trust in us, though we sometimes doubt, to

acknowledge your authority, to become disciples, to make disciples, to learn, to teach, to follow, and to remember that you are with us always, through all the days, until the end of the age. Amen.

NOTES

¹ www.wenstrom.org

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (HarperSanFrancisco)