

Mountaintop Jesus

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
April 17, 2016
Text: Matthew 28:16-20

If you think about it, mountains can be pretty subjective things. Now I realize that sounds pretty counter-intuitive because how can a mountain be subjective. It's either there or it's not. It's either a mountain or it's not. Well, so you'd think. But I guarantee if you're entertaining a guest from someplace out West, say Colorado, and you take them to someplace like Wachusett in Massachusetts or, heaven forbid, Yawgoo in Rhode Island to ski and you try to tell them either of those locations are mountains, they will laugh in your face. "You call that a mountain?" they'll scoff. Come to Colorado and I'll show you a real mountain!" And they would be right of course. Most of our New England mountains, towering and majestic though they may be, are not at all like the Rockies out west.

I didn't fully understand this until I was chairing a national gathering of church educators in Cleveland. A big part of that work turned out to be picking dates that would make travel possible for folks coming from all over the country. Initially, I thought – how hard could this be? You pick some dates, you announce the dates and people make their travel plans and that's the end of it. Well, not really. I learned that several of our folks

who lived out West had to contend with the challenge of traversing the mountains in order to attend. I could not wrap my head around this. “Are they coming by horse and wagon?” I snorted at one point. “No,” was the patient response. “But when you live in some areas of the Rockies you have to worry about what it will take to get to the airport in Denver or Boulder. They have to get over those mountains and make it through mountain passes and then they have to be able to get home again. So, this meeting has to happen by mid-October. That’s just reality.”

I was shocked. I grew up in Pennsylvania, known for its beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains not to mention the Alleghenies, and I live in New England with more mountain ski resorts than I could comprehend. But I never thought of those mountains as barriers to anything I wanted or needed to do. So, the need to take the places folks lived in the mountains into consideration as we planned a major national event was mind boggling to me. So too I was shocked when I realized that people had actually died trying to climb Mount Washington right here in New Hampshire. Apparently naïve folks like me who really didn’t understand mountains, thought you just hiked up the mountain without much planning or consideration of the weather. And they paid the ultimate price for their lack of understanding. It just never occurred to me that a mountain could change your life.

I think that's why when I was exploring all the Resurrection appearances of Jesus I was intrigued by this one in the Gospel of Matthew. It's certainly one of the shortest and it's the only one in the Gospels which takes place on a mountain top. The story of the Ascension in Acts also takes place on a mountaintop and perhaps this story in Matthew is just another version of that one. But it still raises lots of questions for us. Why do the other Gospels, especially Luke and John, have more Resurrection stories about Jesus than Matthew and Mark? Did Matthew just cut to the chase, getting to the real heart of what he thought most important about all those Resurrection appearances? Why does all this matter anyway?

This Resurrection account in Matthew is an important one, I think, for several reasons. First, this story makes clear that doubt among the disciples was present from the very beginning. This simple statement of fact is significant because it reminds us that our doubts are nothing to fear, but really part and parcel of the lived experience of faith. In his commentary on this text in *The Interpreters Bible* theologian George A. Buttrick notes that "doubt is not the opposite of faith but faith's misgivings. ... The opposite of faith is not doubt but cynicism." What he means here is that doubt is just noting that there are parts of some of the Gospel stories, of the Bible in general, that don't ring true for us for any number of reasons. The vengeful, judgmental God of the Old

Testament is not whom we believe our God to be so does that mean we doubt the existence of God? No, our misgivings in this instance actually take us deeper into our faith by encouraging us to ponder more intently who God is to us and that's a good thing. But cynicism – that attitude that God can't possibly be real, that God is just a fantasy figure some folks have made up because they can't cope with life – that is the opposite of faith because it leads away from the life transforming possibilities inherent in a relationship with our transcendent God. Matthew's story of the somewhat doubtful disciples gathering on the mountaintop reminds us that doubt is part and parcel of faith always lived in tension with a world so ready to be cynical, so ready to disregard and ignore God as irrelevant and unnecessary.

This then leads to the second interesting point about Matthew's story of this Resurrection appearance – the fact that Jesus himself made the arrangements to meet with the 11 disciples at a specific time and place. Clearly, this means there was another time the Risen Christ appeared to the 11 and for whatever reason, Matthew didn't include that story. We have to wonder why and yet that is a question without an answer. It also makes his account of this one appearance all the more significant. This meeting was so important that Jesus himself made the arrangements with the disciples. And however that earlier appearance transpired, the disciples followed his instructions

because there they were on the mountaintop at the time Jesus asked them to be there, doubts and all.

And Jesus doesn't disappoint. He wanted to make sure they understood three critical things. First Jesus asserts that the authority he was exercising over heaven and earth, over the human realm and God's, had been given to him by God. This wasn't his doing or his plan. It was God's and they were part of it. They were to be the instruments of his authority by following his final instructions and those instructions were short and simple: "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." These words comprise what came to be known as the "Great Commission." This was the task given to the disciples and to all who became followers of Jesus over the centuries, the task of bringing the Good News of Jesus to everyone all around the world. It is these words in the Gospel of Matthew which missionaries across the millennia took as their marching orders. This commission, this special assignment, is still the work of the church today – to tell what we know of the living Christ and invite those who receive this Good News into the fellowship of the church through the sacrament of baptism.

Unfortunately, these same words of Jesus have been used far too often as a weapon rather than as a gateway to God. European explorers intent on exploiting the wealth of the New World in the

Americas and Asia used the Great Commission in Matthew as an excuse to attack the native peoples they found, murdering those who refused to accept Christ and in many cases enslaving those who did. The papacy even provided legitimacy to this endeavor through the actions of Pope Alexander VI when he issued the Papal Bull *Inter Caetera* in 1493. This bull or papal law gave all the lands of the New World to Spain in exchange for the evangelization of all the native peoples encountered. This is why friars could be found on all those early explorer ships and why the Catholic heritage of Latin America is so deep. To their credit, eventually it was the Church which decried the terrible, inhumane treatment of the native peoples by the Conquistadores. But by that time, the riches of the New World were more than sufficient to drown out the voices of those very disciples who thought they were doing God's work by being there in the first place.

Too often that is the case for those who engage in an unbridled quest to bring the Great Commission to life even today. A relentless attempt to bring the "word of Jesus" to those who know it not has too often brought only pain and heartache to the target audience. This is not because Jesus' instructions were wrong. It's because the people seeking to carry them out forgot that what mattered most to Jesus, what matters most to God, is not tallied up numbers of converts. It's love, God's love which knows no bounds as human love always does. It's making sure

everyone knows the good news that God's love made real through Jesus Christ inspires our souls and enlivens our actions through the Holy Spirit. It's this unending love which undergirds Jesus' final words in this Resurrection appearance – the words some say are the most important words Jesus spoke on that mountaintop—
“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I am with you always, even to the end of the age. That's what we need to hold on to as we consider this Resurrection story of Jesus on a mountaintop and his last words to the people he loved the most. Jesus told them and Jesus tells us we are never left alone. He is always with us. As the Apostle Paul says so beautifully in Romans, there is nothing – *nothing* – which can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Not death, not life, not governments, not things happening now or things that might happen in the future – nothing can separate us from God's love. Turns out, only we can do that. Only we can hear the Good News of the Risen Christ and decide to walk away because it just seems too fanciful, too out of the ordinary, too hard to accept or believe. Only we can separate ourselves from God's love and God's plans, God's hopes, God's dreams for our lives. Only we can gum up the works by hearing the Good News only to act as though it has nothing to do with us. The truth is, dear friends, Jesus has invited us all to the mountaintop to hear his words but what comes next is totally up to us.

One of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most famous speeches is the last one he gave less than 24 hours before he was gunned down in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. This beautiful speech is called the mountaintop speech because of its closing paragraphs. King was encouraging the people not to give up, not to lose hope, not to surrender to the harsh tactics being used against them over and over again as they marched in cities across the South demanding the equal rights that were theirs. He knew his life was in danger and his words were oddly prescient, as they reveal he felt he would die shortly. He urged them not to give up no matter what happened to him. "I've been to the mountaintop," he told them. "... I only want to do God's will ... [and I've] seen the Promised Land. I know we'll get there someday." In these incredible words I think King was claiming his own place on that long ago mountaintop with Jesus. It was his recognition that Jesus had called him there which enabled him to do what he did and the world changed forever. King's words remind us powerfully that Jesus does call us all to the mountaintop to receive our instructions on what we are to do as people of faith and those instructions are simple. Tell what we know about God and Jesus and why it matters in our lives, trusting that as we do, Jesus walks with us every step of the way. We are never left alone. So, dear friends, I guess the question for us is, who's up for a little mountain climbing??? Amen.