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“Never Alone” **Sermon on Matthew 28:16-20**

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If you've ever had doubts about the resurrection of Jesus, you're not alone. Matthew says that those closest to Jesus had their doubts. But here's the thing - it didn't stop them from living out the Word. From the very end of Matthew's Gospel, the 28th chapter, verses 17-20. Hear the Word of God.

Matthew 28:17-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted him.

And Jesus came and said to them, "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."

You would think Jesus would have said on that mountaintop, "Fellas, this is no way to end this story. I can't have you doubting. Not after all the work that the Spirit, God, and I have put into all of this."

All of this... The pregnant Mary, Joseph thinking "I'll dismiss her quietly."

All of this... "Dreams of angels, stars in the sky, Magi, King Herod killing all those innocent babies."

All of this... The baptism of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount. Miracles and parables! The Mount of Transfiguration. The hill of Golgotha, the tomb, the resurrection, and “all authority on heaven and earth, has been given to me....”

After all of this, we end with doubt. The Greek says they worshipped and they doubted. It could have been “The Greatest Story Never Told.”

But even though they doubt, Jesus says, “All systems are go!” as if doubt is where faith begins!

Doubt does have some benefits. A little doubt is sometimes better than people who think they know it all!

I remember strapping on my seatbelt in the passenger seat of the car. I checked the security of my belt. I don’t usually do that, but behind the wheel was a young man. We’ll call him Michael, whose prefrontal cortex was not yet developed. Sixteen years old, and the boy believed he knew everything about driving a car.

Teaching your children to drive: They don’t tell you about this when you’re thinking of having children, because if they did, no one would ever have children. I will say, my daughter was easier to teach than my son. She was timid. Nervous. She had her doubts.

Michael, on the other hand, believed he had all authority on heaven and earth, and off we went. I remember putting a dent in the floorboard because... STOP... STOP! I remember the fun of doing a blind left turn because the truck in front us was making a left turn, so why not follow along? I remember having dark hair at the beginning of the trip.

What I’m saying is, doubt puts the brakes on irrational exuberance.

Doubt says, “I don’t know it to be true, but I believe it to be true.”

Doubt is faith. As my wife still tells our children, “Call me when you get home.” Do you hear doubt? There’s a lot that can go wrong in this wild world. Do you hear the faith? “When you get home. I believe you will get home.”

Doubt is faith! Faith isn’t “I know.” Faith is “I believe.” Doubting disciples believe in what?

It could be that they believe in sacrifice. Lots of people believe in sacrifice. Last night I conducted a wedding. The groom was dressed in his Navy dress uniform. At the reception, everyone who serves or has ever served in the military was asked to stand. And everyone applauded. Because we understand the sacrifice. We believe that laying one’s life down for a good cause - whether it be freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or freedom of the press – is a good thing. People die for freedoms.

It could be they believed that this man Jesus had them believing in things they could die for. Sometimes the world gets so crazy that the only power you have is to believe in something different from everyone else. There are worse things than dying, and that is not living a life that is worth living. Maybe they started to believe that mercy made a lot of sense. Maybe they loved being the light of the world. Maybe they started to believe that Caesar didn’t have all the power.

Jesus said, "All authority has been given to me." And authority up to that point came in the form of well-armed Roman soldiers. Rome wants your money. Rome wants your farm. Rome wants you to say, "Hail, Caesar."

And maybe they believed that this Jesus wasn't that kind of authority.

Jesus knew all about all those kinds of authorities. Reread Matthew 12. In that chapter, the "authorities" are out to get him. And Jesus says to his followers, "Don't make me known." This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet.

Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break.
A dimly burning wick he will not quench.

What do we have here? The one who has all authority is a suffering servant. The one who has all authority is quiet. Non-violent...

This is Jesus. "A bruised reed he will not break."

This is Jesus. "A dimly burning wick he will not quench."

This is Jesus. The one who suffers, who dies, and that giving of himself for others... so stirred the almighty God with love. It was such a brilliant life, and death would not win. Love wins....and to this one is given all authority.

Our faith is not measured in strength. "How many pounds can you lift?" Our faith is measured in weakness. And listen to the weakness:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... who saw equality with God as nothing to be exploited. But he emptied himself. Taking on the form of a servant." You want to lift something really heavy.... lift mercy up for the one who is nailing you to a cross. You want to be tough... the toughest thing is to turn the other cheek. You want something hard to do, use your heart to give life to those who barely have a life. Show mercy.

He did it. We are to do it.

If you feel weak in the area of making disciples, you're not alone. In fact, our weakness is the best place to begin. Do you remember when Jesus looked at his congregation, and he blessed them? Do you remember what he saw? "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." "Blessed are those who mourn..." "Blessed are the weak..." Read the list...merciful, peacemakers. Weak, weak, weak....

And then he says to all these weak souls, "You are the light of the world!" He doesn't say, "Repent! And you'll be the light of the world." He doesn't say, "If you work at it, you'll be the light of the world." He says it as God did in Genesis One.

“Let there be light, and there was light.” “YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD!”
Do you doubt that you’re the light of the world?

When in Durham, I recall a children’s chapel time with the preschool. They marched the kids into the chapel, and there was this 5-year-old, with big pink cheeks, wearing a gold paper crown because it was his birthday. He sat in the front row on the aisle. And I had flashlights, candles, and phone lights. I was showing them the light. I finally said, “Jesus tells us we’re lights. We’re the light of the world.” And that kid just roared with laughter. “We’re not lights, we’re kids!” I said, “Yes, you’re kids but Jesus says you’re lights!” “Ha... you’re silly! We’re kids.” And I said, “Shut up and come out of him!” Mark 4:35. It’s Biblical.

The point is the kid was possessed. The point is we are not alone in having our doubts. We are not alone in having our weaknesses. We are not alone in being called light of the world. We are not alone in becoming more and more like him.

Near my computer, I have a photo of Nedson Zulu. He was, until his death, our missionary in the Tete Province of Mozambique. When you visit that part of the world, the churches welcome you like you are the light of the world. I see his smile. I see with my time in Mozambique and that everyone knew Nedson. We could be eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on a little trail of a road beside our vehicles, and popping out of the tall grass came people with water jars. “Nedson!” He made people smile.

I didn’t care much for the border crossing from Malawi to Mozambique. There were a lot of stern looking faces of soldiers with high-powered machine guns in that zone. And such security made me feel a little insecure. The story was about a previous border crossing, someone in the group from the church like ours took a picture at a border crossing. When the photo was snapped, one of the soldiers who was in the photo came over and snatched the camera away.

Nedson went up to the soldier and spoke to him, softly and gently, for a good 20 minutes. He got the camera back. “Praise the Lord! Nedson saved an \$800 camera.” But now get this - on Sunday, there was a church service near the border. And the soldier came to worship. It’s not about the camera! You got the picture? It’s about “Go ye into all the world.” Into all the world. You cross the borders and get into the hearts of all people. There’s some thought these days that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and doesn’t need a passport. Jesus is just for us right here at home. I don’t know what scripture they’re reading.

But this Jesus says, “Go ye into all nations. My Father created the world! My father made us in his image. God called it all good! And you are the light!”

Do you believe you have power over the authorities of darkness? Nedson disarmed the soldier. “Why are you so angry?” “Life doesn’t have to be that way. Let me tell you about the Good News.” He did that in a country that never made the news. But, ever so quietly, like a dimly burning wick, he made good news. He made good news. Light of the world-news.

We need one another. This holy Trinity - me, you, and Jesus. Remember, where two or more are gathered. Immanuel. God is with us. You are never alone. This Holy Trinity – in the name of the father, son and Holy Spirit...