

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Chris Currie**  
**“Between Athens and Jerusalem and the Ends of the Earth”**  
**Matthew 28:16-20 (Psalm 8)**  
**Trinity Sunday**  
**June 11, 2017**

**Thanksgivings:** to Lib and the Davidson College Presbyterian Church staff and to Davidson College Alumni office for inviting me back to preach today. It is an honor to be with you this weekend and to worship together today. Every day I am thankful for the opportunity and wonder that continues to form me through the education I received at Davidson College...and that education was enriched by the role of faith in the pursuit of liberal arts...and such a life led me to the doors of this congregation for which I must also offer up my gratitude. If you think about it, the college student is one of the worst evangelistic prospects out there...not much in the way of stewardship portfolio...erratic worship attendance...a four year project and unlikely to remain part of the congregation...all of these things were true or at least true in my case, but this congregation ministered to me while I was a student here, members of this church welcomed me into their homes and cared about me deeply, and such hospitality and warmth and investment meant the world to me, and I want to say thank you.

**Matthew 28:16-20**

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’\*

‘When they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted.’ Ah how we idealize the spiritual retreat...up on the mountain with Jesus...away from all our problems and limitations and bothersome neighbors and other petty annoyances. Breathing in the pure, distilled, authentic breath of the Holy Spirit without all the impediments of life and limits and the menial responsibilities that await us at the bottom of the mountain.

I was in Scotland recently visiting different historical and religious sites in the country and one of our guides commented about the Victorian era of historical repair and preservation that the Victorians did not restore a castle or church or an important historical edifice from the medieval period, Reformation period or Enlightenment period to its original form as it would have looked during that period, but rather they added their own flourishes, additions, and embellishments to make it look like how they thought it should have looked during that period. No grand turrets or colorful stained glass, that’s okay, even if they did not have it, they should have. I wonder if that is how we like to approach God, approach our world, and approach the life and discipleship and spiritual life even if it leads us to create a caricature or a Disneyfied version of reality that airbrushes any less impressive flaws or nuance right out of the picture. I thought about that this week when at the beginning of the week my wife and I ate dinner with a wonderful muslim family we love who live in the United Kingdom even as later in the week I worried about walking into a large public square or space vulnerable to the next terrorist attack. Most of the time, we have to be one or the other don’t we?

But listen to what Matthew tells us in this passage on the mountain top with the resurrected Christ in all his splendor and glory: all worshipped but some doubted. Or listen to the Psalmist in our reading from psalm 8 this morning: when looking at the vastness of the universe the moon and stars, the psalmist asks how God could be mindful of human beings in their smallness and limitation and frail features when up against all the grandeur and majesty and vastness of God and our universe? Yet the psalmist reminds, in spite of the smallness, fragility, and seeming inconsequential nature of our humanity, we have been made a little lower than God and also crowned with glory and honor. God’s majestic incomprehensible vastness does not make us

small and inconsequential, but on the contrary, exalts humanity and gives us a particular purpose to reflect the beauty, glory, and grace of God in the limits of our human existence.

In other words, the most beautiful, most full, most fulfilling, most enriching, most true versions of life are not the airbrushed versions, not the parts that try to narrate reality on our own terms, but those that embrace the mess along with the joy, those that see beauty with the flaws rather than trying to eradicate them, those that can worship along with their doubts, their own broken messes, and all the baggage we cannot help but bring with us. Yes, it would be nice to say that we can bring our baggage here and drop it off and are free to walk out the doors without it carefree and completely unburdened, but here in Matthew Jesus instead reveals a community of disciples who have learned to worship together even as they still carry their doubts, their baggage, and their messes with them. With the God of Jesus Christ, we encounter a God who has got the whole world in his hands, and at the very same time we encounter a God who numbers the hairs of our heads and whose divinity includes a willingness to become something small, almost unnoticeable, and inconsequential, even risking the sovereign power, the universal grandeur, the majestic all-encompassing God spanning all creation and all the universe. Both are true about God...the vastness and the smallness...and both are true about us...the awe and wonder...the worship, but also the doubts.

In his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, the Presbyterian minister and prolific author Eugene Peterson reminds us that we live in an age of sensation when if we don't feel something there can be no authenticity in doing it...perhaps on a college campus, the greater danger is that if we don't know something or believe there is some verifiable certainty about it, then there is no authenticity to it. But Peterson reminds us that if we only worshipped when we felt like it, 'there would be precious little worship.' Or if we only worshipped once we felt like we had acquired the requisite amount of knowledge or belief or insight, then there would be precious little worship. 'Feelings,' he continues, 'are great liars...' and we have been trained to think that 'if we don't feel something there can be no authenticity in doing it. But the wisdom of God says something different: that we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting.'<sup>1</sup> Worship helps us develop feelings for God, not the other way around. We act our way into loving, serving, believing...feeling and loving. We worship in the midst of our doubts...we worship in the midst of our messes...we worship in the midst of our uncertainties...we worship, not because we have it all together or have the right knowledge or feel the right way, We don't feel our way into acting...we act our way into feeling. 'When they saw him, they worshipped him. But some doubted.'

To those that know me well or knew me well in college, I did not arrive on this campus with an overpowering academic resume or a fully developed ability to excel in the classroom. I am not sure I even arrived here knowing how to do that or what a joy the pursuit of knowledge and the enjoyment of learning could be. For a good portion of my life, I had mailed it in and been able to coast, but when I walked into the world between Concord Road and Main Street, that could no longer be enough. I had to work; I had to fail; I had to doubt; I had to pray. But somewhere along the way, something happened...it was not a conversion experience that I can pinpoint in particular. But learning, reading, and being a student became less of chore, less of means to something else, less of a list of things to do, and more of a gift and a daily joy unfolding before me. Something I could not do without...something that was not just a means to better employment or a means to the next thing, but something that I could not envision my life without. Weirdly, in his own writings nearly five centuries ago, the Reformer John Calvin spoke very similarly about worship...that worship is not a means to other things, including personal benefits, but that worship is an end in itself whether or not we get everything we ever wanted out of it. We don't worship God as a means to other things, Calvin reminds us, we worship God because worship is an end in itself and will shape all our other loves, desires, feelings, doubts, anxieties, and insecurities, whether or not that was part of the plan.. We don't get to eradicate all those things from our lives, but rather we learn how to live with all that baggage faithfully. We worship not to get certain religious consumer goods, but to stand in awe and wonder before the vast, mysterious, and majestic God. And in so doing we find that our humanity is not depleted or pushed to the side or made inconsequential or disappointed without the consumer transaction, but that we are liberated and transformed and enriched into

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 53-54.

the very people we doubted we were capable of becoming. ‘When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.’

We religious types often reduce and confuse the life of faith to something along the lines of certainty...unless you are completely certain about a, b, c., then you are not a true believer. Or unless you are certain about the authenticity of your thoughts, feelings, political commitments, etc., then your faith is not true. And I am sure the academic world and academic environment also produces certainties and commitments that can be hostile to all faith commitments, absolutizing critical inquiry until it becomes a weapon wielded against those that believe reason and faith can coexist and enrich each other. University of Virginia researcher Jonathan Haidt has shown us that with the decline of the faith community and other mediating institutions today, the world is not becoming more harmonious and open and mutually forbearing, instead we are absolutizing partisan affiliation in the place of faith commitments, and as a result, in the words of National Review writer Jonah Goldberg, common ‘disagreements become insults when politics’ becomes absolutized and ‘becomes a statement about who you are.’<sup>2</sup> But strangely, the world depicted in our scripture lesson from Matthew, the mountaintop where the risen Christ commissions the first disciples is never depicted as a community of absolute certainty in terms of belief or faith, nor in terms of reason and knowledge. Instead, Matthew tells us, ‘when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.’ How many churches are going to put that on their billboards and welcome signs...come worship with us this week, where we see Jesus and we worship him, but some doubt.’

It’s rarely a good thing when a sermon title has to be explained, but it seems to be that in our world that the context of Athens, the world of academic excellence, the life of critical inquiry, and the liberal arts community, and the world of Jerusalem, life together in Christian community, the life of faith, and the pursuit of Christian discipleship, it seems that there is a ‘certainty’ that these two worlds cannot coexist or enrich each other or sharpen each other in pursuit of their distinct, and at times, different ends. But what we see in that earliest Christian community is hardly a gathering of purely distilled true believers, nor do we see a bunch of primitive unenlightened religious impulses that need eradicating by the intellectually refined and enlightened. Instead, we get it all...awe and wonder before God and a liberated and messy humanity, the Lord who is majestic throughout all the earth and a humanity exalted (not diminished) crowned with glory and honor. ‘They worshipped him; and some doubted.’ We get the mess with the blessing, and in so doing, learn that faith, and life together in Christian community, like the liberal arts, is never just a means to something better, grander, or higher achieving. Neither worship nor education are means to other ends, but together both help us become truly human, richer people, not in all the success we are able to acquire, but in the lives we are able to lead in service to the crucified and risen Christ, worshipping and doubting together, in the midst of all the messes as well as some successes, until Christ’s kingdom comes. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> William Saletan, ‘Why Won’t They Listen?’ Book Review of ‘The Righteous Mind’ by Jonathan Haidt, New York Times, Sunday Book Review, March 23, 2012, and Jonah Goldberg, ‘The Lifestylization of Politics,’ <http://www.nationalreview.com/g-file>